At The National College, our WakeUpWednesday guides empower and equip parents, carers and educators with the confidence and practical skills to be able to have informed and age-appropriate conversations with children about online safety, mental health and wellbeing, and climate change. Formerly delivered by National Online Safety, these guides now address wider topics and themes. For further guides, hints and tips, please visit nationalcollege.com.

10 Top Tips for Parents and Educators

DEALING WITH TRAUMATIC & CHALLENGING EVENTS

Children and young people may face a wide range of traumatic or challenging events – from bereavement and illness to bullying, family breakdowns, or witnessing violence. These experiences can affect their mental health, behaviour, relationships, and academic progress. With the right support from trusted adults, children can begin to feel safe, rebuild resilience, and develop healthy coping strategies. This guide offers practical and empathetic ways to provide support and promote positive outcomes.

1 A PREDICTABLE ENVIRONMENT

Children who have experienced trauma often feel unsafe or uncertain. Creating routines, setting clear expectations, and maintaining consistency can help restore a sense of security. This structure offers reassurance and helps children feel more in control of their surroundings.

2 USE LANGUAGE THAT MATCHES THEIR AGE

Speak clearly and sensitively, choosing words that are appropriate for the child's age. Avoid overwhelming them with too much information at once. Offer gentle, honest explanations and focus on reassurance, especially when talking about difficult or sensitive subjects.

3 TRAUMA AND THE BODY

Mention briefly that trauma can show up in physical ways, such as changes in sleep, appetite, concentration, or as physical aches and pains. Consider this before labelling behaviour as 'difficult' or 'lazy'. Some children may become withdrawn, while others may be more outwardly challenging. Highlight that there's no 'one way' children respond.

4 AVOID RETELLING OR RELIVING TRAUMA

Children sometimes get asked to explain or repeat their experience multiple times. Striking a balance of when to listen and when to gently redirect can help to avoid unnecessary re-traumatisation. Acknowledge, but don't probe for detail unless safeguarding procedures require it.

5 AVOID DISMISSING OR MINIMISING FEELINGS

Seemingly well-meaning comments like "It's not that bad" or "You're okay" may shut down children's emotional expression and are often not helpful. Instead, acknowledge what they're feeling, even if it seems small. Validating a child's emotions helps them feel seen and encourages open communication in future.

6 UNDERSTAND HOW THEY'RE FEELING

Many children don't have the words to express their emotions, especially during distress. Supporting them to name what they're feeling – such as angry, scared or sad – builds emotional literacy. Tools like emotion charts, drawing, or storytelling can help externalise feelings in a safe, manageable way.

7 BE AWARE OF YOUR OWN RESPONSES

Children pick up on adult emotions and reactions, often mirroring them. Staying calm, even in challenging situations, helps children feel more secure. Practising your own self-regulation is an important way to model healthy stress management and encourages children to do the same.

8 SEEK PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

While many children benefit from everyday emotional support, some will need more specialised help. If symptoms persist, worsen, or disrupt their daily life, consult with school safeguarding leads, a GP, or a mental health professional. Early intervention can prevent long-term difficulties and support healthy recovery.

9 MAINTAIN CONNECTION

Isolation can worsen the impact of trauma. Encourage involvement in group activities, praise their efforts, and ensure they feel like a valued part of the school or family community. Meaningful connection with trusted adults and peers builds resilience and a sense of belonging.

10 BE PATIENT – HEALING TAKES TIME

There's no quick fix for emotional recovery. Children may have good days and setbacks, and progress may not always be visible or linear. Your ongoing support, patience, and presence can help them move forward at their own pace, knowing they are not alone.

Meet Our Expert

This guide has been written by Anna Bateman. Anna is passionate about placing prevention at the heart of every school by integrating mental wellbeing within the curriculum, school culture, and systems. She has been a member of the advisory group for the Department for Education, advising them on their mental health green paper.

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