

# Luke Batty's violent death will trigger deep fears in young children, say experts

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'It shakes them to their core. And it makes them feel like the rest of the world isn't safe any more.'

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Greg Anderson with his son Luke Batty as a baby.

"It shakes them to their core. And it makes them feel like the rest of the world isn't safe any more."

Joe Tucci, head of the Australian Childhood Foundation, believes tragedies such as the killing of 11-year-old Luke Batty in Tyabb last Wednesday alter children's view of the world.

"The violence is what makes it harder than other forms of death," he said. "The framework that children have is that parents should protect them and here's a dad that has killed his son. These kids will be thinking, 'imagine if it was me'. It really is a loss of the things that they believe to be true, a loss of innocence."

Dr Tucci said the children who witnessed the "incomprehensible violence" towards Luke near the cricket nets at Bunguyan Reserve would suffer more profoundly than those who lost friends to illness, accident or suicide.

He said children exposed to trauma often replayed the memory "on a continuous loop", amplifying their distress.

"What they're trying to do is make sense of something that can't make sense," he said. "Not even adults can make sense of something like this."

Flinders Christian Community College, the school Luke attended, made a point of running a normal schedule as much as possible last week. The first priority on the morning after his death was pinpointing who needed support.

"There was a level of anxiety and stress when the kids came in," the school's director of student wellbeing, Richard Van Orsouw, said. "We are reassuring kids that it's not going to happen to them. That's a real fear that a lot of the younger kids have come up with; am I going to be safe? Kids start to question, 'is this the way life is?'"



Luke Batty.

The way schools are required to respond in emergencies is well documented. Less so is how to react when family violence spills into the public arena.

On Thursday at Luke's school the principal met more than 100 distraught parents; teachers were given information packs on grief; counselling was made available to students and staff.

By Friday substitute teachers were floating between classes, offering relief to those who needed a break.

"We wanted to gain an understanding of which students had witnessed this and which students had been seriously traumatised," Mr Van Orsouw said. "We also had to look at whether our staff were capable of working with those kids. Some [teachers] weren't sure how to go into the classroom and what would be the right way to talk about it."



Friends arrive at the Tyabb oval to place flowers near the scene. Photo: Joe Armao

The Education Department does not have a specific policy for dealing with a student's death. When it happens in the public school system a critical incident team is deployed.

Last week's horror in Tyabb led the department to send that team to the coastal town's two primary schools, with support officers visiting 12 other schools around the Mornington Peninsula region to provide counselling.

Mr Van Orsouw said teachers did not give students information about Luke's death not publicly available and that the school advised parents to regulate what their children accessed through the media.

Australian National University professor and psychiatrist Beverley Raphael said it was vital that the parents of children who witnessed the attack took steps to minimise further trauma.

"When they see something like this in reality it's horrific, but when they see it in the media over and over again those are the images that stay with them," she said.

Dr Tucci said tragedies such as Luke's death had become part of the public discourse in a way not seen a decade ago.

"When you have hundreds of thousands of people in active conversation there can be lots of positive messages, but it can also be quite damaging," he said. "The minute the conversation no longer feels personal is when media and social media causes problems for kids."

Dr Tucci said public events, such as the candlelight vigil at Bunguyan Reserve on Thursday night, were an important part of recovery for children.

"Remembering Luke and what he meant to that community is going to reinforce the importance of relationships to children, and it's relationships which are now being threatened by this act of violence," he said.

At Luke's school students are already planning ways to celebrate his life, starting with tributes they are preparing for his mother, Rosie.

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