

How do I explain an epileptic fit to my child?

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My son, who is 6 years old, saw someone having a seizure. He asked me if the lady was crazy, but she was having an epileptic fit. How do I explain this to him?

Stephanie Wong, Senior Social Worker from Enlighten-Action for Epilepsy answers: Witnessing a seizure especially a tonic-clonic seizure (what is called an epileptic fit in layman terms) can be a difficult and shocking experience for any child. Firstly, you are right to want to review the whole incident and give your child the right message about epilepsy. Ignorance can breed fear, which can lead to misunderstanding.

You can explain to your child that every individual is unique and different in their own way. Some people need glasses to see clearly; some cannot eat sugar because they have diabetes; those with allergies cannot eat nuts or they might start sneezing if they are exposed to dust or pets etc. Similarly this person has a condition called “epilepsy” and a person with epilepsy has seizures. One kind of seizure can make a person fall down and shake all over for a few minutes, which is what that lady experienced.

Explain to the child that the brain controls most of our movements. It sends messages to our body to move our hands, open our mouths to eat, take a step and walk etc. During the seizure a part of their brain does not communicate in the correct manner, and that causes some unusual actions in the person’s body, such as the stiffening and shaking of the body. In a few minutes that person’s brain will begin to communicate correctly, and the seizure will stop. But the lady might need to rest for a while as her body will be very tired. Although the seizure symptoms look strange, the lady is definitely not crazy.

Epilepsy is a medical condition and it happens because the brain is not sending the right message to the body. When the seizure stops, the lady will not really have any memory of the seizure and can go back to doing what she was doing earlier. It is important to reiterate that she might look a little strange when she has a seizure, but it is the epilepsy that causes it and she is no different from you or I.

Secondly, do explain to your child that there is nothing to be scared of. The lady is neither in pain nor is she of danger to your child or anybody witnessing her seizure. The seizures are not contagious either, and will not happen to someone who does not have epilepsy. You can even encourage your child to be a little ambassador of epilepsy by introducing him or her to some basic seizure first-aid. 1. Stay Calm, 2. Move any furniture to the side, 3. Call an adult for help immediately.

Finally, please emphasise once again that the lady is NOT CRAZY and if in the future he has a friend at school with epilepsy, he should treat them just like he treats others.

If you and your son would like to learn more about epilepsy or want to become an ambassador by spreading the right messages about epilepsy, we have a free children's booklet that helps young children to understand the condition better.

Please also inform your son's school that Enlighten-Action for Epilepsy runs free training sessions and talks to students of all primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong to increase epilepsy awareness.

We are happy to come to your son's school too. They can contact our training department on 2820 0111 to book the free training session. They can also visit our website www.enlightenhk.org and read about our school education and training programmes.

Enlighten-Action for Epilepsy is the only epilepsy-focused, non-medical Hong Kong charity that aims to benefit anyone directly or indirectly affected by epilepsy. It runs a range of complimentary, bilingual epilepsy-focused programmes to meet its objectives of raising epilepsy awareness in Hong Kong, and supporting those indirectly and directly affected by epilepsy and helping improve their quality of lives. For more information, go to www.enlightenhk.org (<http://www.enlightenhk.org/index.php?CID=315>)