

Supporting children throughout natural disasters



Natural disasters, such as bushfires, floods, cyclones and droughts, are stressful and often traumatic. What takes place, and the speed with which it happens, can be chaotic, confusing and overwhelming. Understandably, as a parent or carer, you may feel worried about the impact on your child.

Here are some insights that might be helpful as you support your child at this difficult time.

How might my child react to what has happened?

Just like us, children may be feeling scared, anxious and overwhelmed. Children and young people will show this in different ways, depending on their age, understandings, life experiences, personality and available support. The following are the kinds of reactions you might see in your child (or experience yourself) following the disaster:

- high state of alert and stress
- emotional distress
- emotionally flat or frozen
- irritability, nervousness or jumpiness
- sleeping difficulties
- appetite changes
- physical complaints (stomach aches, headaches)
- nightmares or intrusive, distressing thoughts
- wanting to stay close together (being 'clingy')
- children regressing to younger behaviours.

These are reactions many children experience in the days and weeks following a natural disaster. Should these become worse or prolonged it is important to seek professional support.

How can I support my child?

In the days and weeks following natural disaster, children and young people will likely benefit from:

Safety

Children need to feel the protection and comfort of their parents or other familiar caregivers. Your child may wish to be held, hugged, physically close to you, or at least know where you are. Remind them they are loved, important and safe, especially if they are in an unfamiliar environment. Let them know that other adults (family, community members, SES volunteers) are doing everything they can to keep them safe. Your consistent, comforting presence helps them regain a sense of emotional and physical safety.

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We cannot change what our children have seen or experienced nor the distress they are feeling. However, there are things we can do to help them cope and recover well.



Communication

Explain what has happened and, if possible, what will happen next. Invite their input into decisions (such as whether and when they would like to come to see the house). Take care not to make promises that might not be able to be kept. Answer any questions simply, honestly and clearly, but don't add any unnecessary or graphic details.

Allow your child the chance to talk – which might sometimes be recounting aspects of what happened or wondering out loud about things that may not seem so important or urgent. Give them space to cry and share their worries, sadness and fears. Listen for what they may not be saying as well as for what they are – be open to but don't force these conversations. It may be helpful to let your child know you notice and are available by saying something like, 'It's been a tough time for us lately. Can you think of anything that might help you right now'?

Accept their reactions and feelings and reassure them these are normal. Don't panic if you get upset, it is okay to cry together. Acknowledging that sadness and loss are shared is an important part of the healing process. Try not to add additional worries and concerns of your own.

Calm

Despite the stress and many challenges you are facing, try to respond as calmly as possible to your child's reactions. If there is a lot of activity happening around you, look for quieter, calm areas to be and consider what you might do together. Try to avoid your child overhearing other people's distressed conversations or repeated media reporting. Share with them something you do to calm down when you feel stressed (such as taking some slow, deep breaths).

Hope

Share with your children the acts of bravery, generosity and kindness that others have shown towards you and others impacted by the disaster. It gives us comfort and hope to know that others care and are offering support in many different ways.

Contributing

Showing care for others can be empowering and healing. Invite your child to think of ways to help others in similar or worse situations. This might be setting up games for other children to join and/or suggesting safe ways they can help with the clean up. Invite their contributions with relevant decisions and tasks moving forward.

Time

Children need love, reassurance, patience, care and time to recover from natural disasters, as do adults. Be mindful of their on-going needs and reactions, and of the important things in life, even once you become busy with rebuilding your lives. Try to find time and space for important conversations about further changes, such as temporary accommodation, the rebuild, or moving communities.

You

Take care of yourself as best you can, so that you are able to support yourself and your family throughout this difficult time. Once the initial crisis is over, ask for any support you may need. Share the burdens and challenges with a trusted friend or family member, find some time for yourself, and celebrate the small milestones on the journey back to your new 'normal'.

This resource has been developed in partnership with the 'Centre for Children and Young People' at Southern Cross University.

Stormbirds program

The Stormbirds Program offers further support to children and young people affected by natural disaster.

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