

DISASTER

Parent and Carer Tips



Phoenix
AUSTRALIA

Tips for supporting children and teenagers following a disaster

Children and teenagers show a wide range of reactions to trauma. A young person's reaction following a disaster will depend on factors such as the level of support they have, and other things that are going on in their lives. Disasters, such as floods, cyclones, bushfires, etc. can threaten a young person's sense of safety and predictability. Many young people will show some emotional and behavioural changes, such as fear, sadness, difficulty concentrating, separation anxiety, sleep problems and/or other behavioural problems.

With time and the support of parents, family and friends, most children and young people will recover from the negative impacts of the disaster without professional help.

There are several things that parents and carers can do to help children and adolescents to cope after a disaster.

How parents and carers can help

Maintain routines

- Maintain your child's, and family's, daily routines as much as possible – for example, going to school, seeing friends, and doing usual hobbies, activities and chores. Getting back to usual routines is not always easy with the disruption that disasters can cause, but this is a helpful way for children to develop a sense of 'normality' and safety.
- Participate in enjoyable activities together as a family.

Help your child and teenager to feel safe

- Reassure your child that he or she is safe and cared for.
- Limit your child's exposure to television or other sources of information about the disaster.
- If your child wants to, talk with him/her about the disaster.
- Encourage your child to express how they are feeling – this is part of the healing process.
- Children and young people can become frightened about things they don't fully understand. Answer your child's questions about the disaster in an open and honest manner. Children will differ in how much information they want, take your child's lead when deciding how much detail to share.
- Don't be afraid to tell your child if you can't answer all of their questions.



Make sure you are coping

- After a disaster, parents/carers are more easily able to help their child if they are taking good care of themselves.
- Therefore discussing your own disaster reactions with another adult, such as a trusted friend, family member, or GP may make it easier for you to talk with your child about their disaster experiences and reactions.

Common trauma and stress reactions

- Development of new fears
- Seeming more irritable, worried, or sad
- Seeming dependent or clingy
- 'Going backwards' with skills – such as speech or toileting, or a return to other behaviour from a younger stage of development
- Challenging, 'acting out' or attention seeking behaviour
- Poor school performance
- Problems paying attention
- Unexplained aches or pains
- Loss of interest in activities
- Reliving the traumatic experience through drawings or play
- Becoming very concerned about the possibility of future disasters or about 'bad things' happening
- Nightmares
- Seeming jumpy or on the lookout for danger.

Common trauma and stress reactions

- Many young people will experience some of these reactions immediately after a disaster, and for most, these will reduce with time.
- However, some young people will go on to develop more persistent mental health problems such as posttraumatic stress disorder, depression and/or anxiety, and require additional support and treatment.
- Parents and carers are in a good position to monitor early trauma and stress reactions, provide support and seek professional advice as needed.
- If you notice that your child continues to experience significant trauma or stress reactions for more than two weeks, or if your child is very distressed or unable to participate in usual activities, talk to your GP about this. There are effective treatments for children and adolescents who experience difficulties after a traumatic event.

If anxiety, depression, sleep difficulties or irritability persist for more than two weeks after your return home, you should talk to your GP. For immediate assistance and/or 24-hour counselling and referrals, see details on the right.

Useful services and resources

Parentline - for immediate assistance
13 22 89

Australian Psychological Society - find a psychologist
1800 333 497

Kids Helpline
1800 551 800

HeadSpace (12 - 25 years)
1800 650 890