

*Supporting our communities*

## Supporting children after natural disasters and crisis

When a community recovers from the effects of trauma, it is important not to overlook the specific needs of children. Children depend on the adults around them for safety and security. In the event of a disaster, they will need support, encouragement, comfort and care to share their stories.

As parents and carers, our first concern is about how to protect and take care of our children during a crisis. Knowing how to support our kids can reduce stress and help in creating some sense of control over the situation.



During a crisis event, it is important to use reliable sources of information as there can be an array of misinformation on social media and the Internet.

State and federal government health departments and government websites are the best for factual sources of information.

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## **The impact of trauma on children**

Children will respond and react to natural disasters and crisis situations in different ways. A child's reaction will greatly depend on their developmental stage and previous exposure to stressful situations. It is essential that children and young people are provided with basic, age-appropriate information.

Interrelate has developed some tips to help parents and carers support their children.



## Tips for supporting children

### 1. Be factual and explain what has happened in a child-friendly way

- Children might find it difficult to understand what they are hearing or seeing online or on television. They are also hearing – and overhearing - things from other people and could feel anxiety, stress, and sadness.
- Role modelling behaviour to children by remaining calm and reassuring is important.
- It is important to consider what conversations are held in front of children. Adult conversations about the event are best kept away from children as children will react to verbal and non-verbal cues. It is amazing what children absorb and take in, even when we think they aren't paying attention.
- It is important to provide comfort and reassurance so that they feel safe; this will help to reduce children's stress and anxiety.

### 2. Enable the child to have a voice

- Children also need an avenue to express their feelings and help to reframe their concerns and perspectives. Children will have questions and it is important that we listen and make ourselves available.
- It is important to have an open conversation with your child to help them understand. Children have a right to truthful information; however, we also need to keep them safe and reduce stress and anxiety levels.

#### **Ideas to help conversations with children include:**

- Start by inviting your child to talk about the issue. Find out how much they already know and follow their lead.
- Use drawings, stories, and other activities to help to open a discussion.

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- Demonstrate that you're listening by giving your child your full attention.
- Use age-appropriate language.
- Don't overwhelm them with too much information a little at a time is okay.
- Encourage them to express and communicate their feelings.
- Discuss the different reactions they may experience and explain that these are normal reactions to an abnormal situation.
- Monitor their reactions and be sensitive to increasing levels of anxiety.
- Explain that some online information is not accurate and even media reports can be misleading.
- Share with them some of the social media pages showing the positive ways that people are responding to the situation.
- Use creative fun activities to engage with your children. During disasters or in crisis, enjoyable events and activities may be put on hold or cancelled this can result in many disappointments, so try to bring as much fun into your living environment as you can.
- Try to be future focused in your conversations. Children are very focused on the present and they might perceive that the current situation will last forever. Try to remind them that this is a temporary situation as often as you can.

Positive interactions can build their resilience and enhance recovery. It is important to establish a sense of safety for children.

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### **3. Limit exposure to news**

- Television, the internet, and social media need to be monitored. Constantly watching news updates can cause more anxiety and fear. Information designed for adults can particularly create confusion in younger children, so limit their exposure to the news.
- Some exposure is okay; however, the news and social media can heighten anxiety. Instead of watching the news, you could organise play, depending upon the age, of the children. Think about doing some fun activities such as cooking as a family or playing a game. You can catch up with the news later. Offer support, hope, and reassurance.
- It is distressing for children to see and hear about the impact of a disaster or crisis. In a disaster, this could be loss to property, human life and the possible impact on the Australian economy, including job losses. Children might have difficulty in separating what is happening from their own reality.
- Children need time to be children and carefree without the worries of the world on their shoulders. Staying positive and optimistic and having the mindset that this is a temporary situation will help. We might have to change our lives such as cancelling fun events, holidays or activities, for now, but remind them that they can be rescheduled so they will enjoy these later on. Temporary accommodation is temporary.

### **4. Keeping regular routines**

- Keep regular routines where possible. Routine helps children feel a sense of safety and security. If your child reads a book before bed, completes homework after school, or has playtime outside before dinner. Try to make sure they continue to do these just as they would on a normal day.
- Ensure they get up, have meals, and go to bed at their normal times. Consistency and structure are calming during times of stress. Children, especially younger ones, or those who are anxious, benefit from knowing what's going to happen and when.

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- Role model respectful relationships
- It is also important that we avoid blaming. Everyone deserves to feel safe and be respected. As parents, we need to role model the importance of being kind to one another.

### **5. Connect with family**

- Keep in touch with grandparents and family members via phone or online if you are separated due to a crisis or disaster, technology can help maintain some connection.
- Children are resilient, however, sometimes there can be signs that a child needs further support and assistance. If a child is showing signs of distress that can't be managed through the proposed strategies, it is important to seek further assessment and support from your school counsellor, General Practitioner, or a professional psychologist/counsellor.
- Look after yourself. Self-care in this time is also important for parents/carers. In stressful times it is essential that you also look after yourself. You will cope better if you have some time to self-care for yourself. How we manage our own anxiety has an impact on our kids.

**Interrelate are here to support** – [contact us](#) to have a chat about how we can help

Refer to our tip sheet on [Enhancing children's well-being in times of crisis](#)