Supporting the recovery of children and adolescents following a natural disaster

For Early Childhood Professionals, School Staff and Student Support Services Program Staff

Natural disasters impact people both directly and indirectly. Children and young people are particularly vulnerable and can respond to traumatic events such as a natural disaster in a variety of ways. Staff play a vital role in providing support, advice and guidance to children and adolescents throughout the healing process following a traumatic event.

This brochure provides information about specialised support for children and adolescents outside their early childhood or school setting.

Working in partnership: kindergartens, schools and families

It is important to work in partnership with parents/carers and maintain supportive, open and respectful communication about a child or young person’s health, wellbeing and educational progress. This helps to ensure that children and young people are adequately supported and continue to stay engaged with their learning and education after a traumatic event.

If you are concerned about the behaviour of a child or young person, it is a good idea to discuss these concerns with their parents/carers in a safe, supportive environment at the kindergarten or school. Many parents/carers may have experienced loss and any discussions need to consider the circumstances of a family. Staff members who have also experienced loss may find it difficult to speak about issues facing children and adolescents in their care. Kindergarten and school leaders should ensure that their staff can access support from a Student Support Services Program Staff (SSSP) or an external support service when working with parents/carers about issues concerning children or young people.

Early childhood and school-based support for children and adolescents

There are a variety of support services available in kindergartens and schools. These include early childhood professionals, school staff, Student Welfare Coordinators, Student Support Services Officers, Primary Welfare Officers, and school nurses. Each provide support, advice and information to parents/carers, children and young people who are having problems.

Student Support Services Program Staff (SSSP) in schools

SSSPs play a vital role by providing specialist support and assistance to schools by helping strengthen the capacity of schools to keep students engaged with their education and by providing specialist support and assistance. SSSPs work closely with school staff, parents/carers, students and community based health and support services to ensure students have access to appropriate levels of support at the right time.

Who may benefit from specialised support from an allied health professional?

Each child or young person will have a unique response to a traumatic event, including loss and/or grief issues. There are differences in the length of time it takes individuals to begin the recovery process, and there is no ‘one way’ that children and young people will respond and work through feelings of sadness, anger, loss and/or grief. There are some behaviours that children and young people may exhibit that need to be addressed and these should be discussed with parents/carers to ensure that adequate support is provided.
These concerning behaviours include:

- feeling anxious, fearful or distressed
- experiencing physical discomfort, including problems eating, sleeping or toileting
- demonstrating behaviour problems such as aggression or anger that disrupt a child or young person’s development or adjustment at home or at school
- having difficulty concentrating or behaving impulsively
- having nightmares or bed-wetting
- having difficulty with relationships within the family and/or with their friends
- refusing to attend kindergarten or school.

Children and young people who have loss of their home and/or belongings are at higher risk of exhibiting concerning behaviours and should be closely monitored and supported. In these situations, staff can provide parents/carers with information about any specialised support their child may need.

What services are available in local communities?

There are a range of specialised support services available in affected communities, including community health centres, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, drug and alcohol support services and allied health professionals.

There are also a number of telephone support services available to provide support, counselling, information and referrals, including:

- Kids Helpline 1800 551 800
- Maternal and Child Health Line 13 22 29
- Lifeline 13 11 14
- Mensline 1300 789 978
- Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement 1300 664 786
- Parentline 13 22 89
- Relationships Australia 1300 364 277
- Directline (drug & alcohol support) 1800 888 236

Accessing support from an allied health professional

To access specialised support from an allied health professional, parents/carers need to get a referral from their GP. If you believe a child or adolescents would benefit from an additional level of support from an allied health professional, you should discuss this with their parents/carers.