

Helping children and adolescents after a natural disaster

Information for Principals and Early Childhood Directors

Natural disasters can devastate communities. They are often unpredictable and can result in loss of human life as well as destroying homes, animals, wildlife and, particularly in the eyes of children, schools and early childhood settings. Natural disasters may also cause serious emotional distress to children and families.

After a natural disaster, most families can expect to recover over time, particularly with support from relatives, friends, community agencies and organisations. It is important to remember that the recovery time for an individual may relate to past and present experiences, the thoughts and actions that contribute to these experiences, and an individual's own coping strategies. Children need time to recover from losses such as family members, friends, homes, pets, schools and early childhood settings.

Children, particularly those of a younger age, will look to parents/carers for love and support during and following a disaster. Additionally, it is important that parents and teachers provide information, comfort and reassurances. Parents and teachers need to provide calm and honest answers to children's questions and, importantly, be guided by what a child asks. It helps children to understand what has happened if

parents/carers and teachers spend time responding to their needs.

Adjustment to a natural disaster may be difficult for some time. This can result in impairment in social, emotional, behavioural and cognitive functioning for some children.

Suggestions for schools and early childhood settings for crisis response and recovery planning

- Develop an information letter acknowledging the disaster and the effects it may have had on children and families, letting parents know what the school/early childhood setting is doing to support children and adolescents.
- Address any needs of staff and provide assistance.
- Develop a list of the names and phone numbers of support staff or the crisis response team (if applicable).
- Have a sign-in book and name badges for counsellors and any visitors to your school/early childhood setting.
- Provide an information sheet for parents advising them of the process for meeting with a counsellor.

- Provide an information sheet for parents outlining possible reactions children and adolescents may have and strategies for dealing with them.
- Designate rooms for counsellors to meet with children and families and discuss any assistance they require.
- Develop a resource list of local external agencies indicating what they can provide for families affected by a disaster – such as food, clothing, accommodation, legal advice and financial assistance.
- Designate a person to deal with any media inquiries, ensuring that children are protected at all times. For any advice related to managing the media, the Department's Media Unit is contactable on 9637 2871.

