

Helping children following a natural disaster

Information Booklet



This has been developed to assist those who work with children in schools to address issues in relation to a natural disaster.

Introduction

This booklet has been developed as a resource for teachers to help children recover from the effects of a natural disaster.

Disasters such as floods, bushfires, earthquakes and explosions can be quite traumatic for children. Children have difficulty understanding and accepting that there are events in their lives that cannot be controlled or predicted.

Adults cannot 'fix' a disaster, cannot solve it and cannot keep it from happening again.



Disasters and their effects

What is a disaster?

A disaster is a devastating, catastrophic event that may be life threatening, injury producing which may create the following distressing experiences:

- Sense of fear
- Disruption of home, routine
- Feeling that one's life was threatened
- Witness to injury, death, pain
- Feeling 'trapped', isolated
- Feeling life is out of control
- Threatening basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing, comfort
- Being separated from family members
- Children taking on the role of 'adult' for parents who are distressed
- Loss – possibly people, pets and/or possessions, environment, routine, relationships.





Some children may have previously experienced traumatic events which may influence their response to and recovery from this event; there will be a varying degree of reactions and symptoms.



What can a teacher do?

Firstly, look after your own needs. You may want support/assistance in dealing with feelings such as helplessness, fear, anger. You will be unable to assist/support children until you have worked through your own issues. Teachers must firstly know a child's baseline (usual) behaviour and any cultural or religious responses before they can identify 'unusual' or problematic behaviour in a student.



Starting Points

- Teachers need to take the time to think about what the disaster means for them before beginning to work with children.
- Begin the healing process with the children. Always begin with the child's starting point, use their words to talk about their experiences.
- Identify those children who may require support from mental health professionals. You can refer to the Checklist at the back of this book. Always discuss your concerns with Parents.



Talking



Children may wish to ‘talk ‘about the disaster in different ways – some will use language, some will use play and others may prefer to write or draw.

Allow the child to take the lead – they will guide the discussion, give them time to ask questions, discuss their feelings and emotions.

Inform and educate children about the event. This will assist to make it less threatening to talk about. Reassure children by verbally acknowledging and ‘normalising’ their experiences. Listen carefully to what children say and acknowledge with them the ‘awfulness’ of their experience.

Remember that for some children ‘talking’ is not what they want.

WHY?

- In some cultures, talking openly is not appropriate
- Some children have been raised with family members not talking about their feelings
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Some children prefer not to discuss their feeling openly.

All of these reasons should be respected.

Writing or Drawing

Children may wish to express themselves using WRITING OR DRAWING.

Writing or drawing as with talking should only be presented as an option for expression – not as a required activity.

Some suggestions:

- Draw/write a book together
- Write a journal/draw pictures
- Collective mural (murals develop support and teamwork) - use it to demonstrate getting through a difficult event. You could facilitate discussion around this.
- Language is important – rather than saying 'draw a fireman, policeman, helping people, say 'draw a person you saw doing something helpful during or after the disaster'. This allows the child to communicate what is important to them.
- Play – allow children to communicate through play activities.



REMEMBER - a drawing or play activity can give you clues to some deeper issues the child may have.

Writing or Drawing (Cont.)

Allow for a full range of expression – some children draw recognisable things others draw abstractly.

Respect all drawings, as they are individual children's expressions.

Discussion after the child has finished a drawing or play activity may assist to bring 'closure' to their experience.

- Allow children to talk about their writing/drawing
- Some children will have closure by listening
- Allow children to finish with drawing a picture of themselves now – you can ask them to draw how they are 'different'



Some children's books you may like to use

Familiar Stories

Sometimes children prefer to hear a story about “remember when
.....”

Stories you make up

Teachers can make up their own stories around the disaster. You need to be careful to present story telling as part of the Recovery process for children. Therefore the story will need to be age appropriate and will need to show how thoughts, feelings and emotions are normal and natural reactions that diminish over time. The story must not include a teacher's own difficult experiences, issues and stresses.

Sometimes books are a great resource for opening the way for discussion with children and adolescents:

- C. McCloud, 2006. *Have You Filled a Bucket Today? A Guide to Daily Happiness for Kids*. Ferne Press.
- T. Parr, 2009. *The Feel Good Book*. Hachette Book Group.
- V. Ironside, 2000. *The Huge Bag of Worries*. Hodder Children's Books.
- J. Conway, 1997. *Sometimes it scares me*. Children's Press,
- M. Holmes, 2000. *A Terrible Thing Happened*. Magination Press.

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(Acknowledgement that some of the materials have been adapted from 'Recovering from Loss' – Health Department, Victoria, 1985.)