

Helping children and adolescents after a natural disaster

Information for Parents and Carers

Natural disasters are unpredictable and can have a disastrous impact. We need to protect children and adolescents from the pain and horror of such devastating situations. Do not assume your children know nothing about the disaster. They probably know more than you think.

News travels quickly today because of technology. Adults, children and adolescents learn about disasters and tragedies shortly after they occur. They may be exposed to events by watching live media coverage, print media articles or by talking to others. Television coverage is designed to attract our attention.

What can a parent/carer do when a natural disaster impacts on children and adolescents?

- Be available and talk to your children. Let them know that it is okay to talk about what has happened. Not talking about the situation may give the impression that your children cannot talk about what has happened or that you are inaccessible.
- Monitor the amount of television your children watch. Viewing with your children allows you to discuss the situation and monitor their levels of stress and understanding of what has occurred.
- Listen to what your children say, think and feel. Observe to see if there are any changes in behaviour.
- You do not need to explain more than they ask about, but be willing to answer their questions. Do not be afraid to say you do not have the answer.
- Reassure your children and help them feel safe. When devastating events occur, children not directly exposed may be afraid that the same disaster may impact directly on them. It is important to let them know that they are not at risk (if they are not). Try to be realistic and reassuring. You can try to support and protect them, but you cannot prevent all bad things from happening. Parents can tell children that they love them and give them plenty of hugs. This often reassures children and helps them to heal.
- Maintain routines to help children feel safe.
- Share your feelings with your children. If you tell them how you are feeling, tell them about the positive things you are doing to cope with your feelings, such as going for walks or talking to friends. Encourage your children to come up with their own ways of coping.
- Help children use their own creative outlets, such as writing, drawing and music, to express their feelings. Children may not be comfortable or skilled with words, especially in relation to difficult situations. Use drawings, music and/or books to help you understand their reactions.
- Your children may be concerned for people they do not know who have been affected. Children are often afraid not only for themselves, but also for people they do not know. They may learn via the media and from discussion among adults that many people have suffered the loss of loved ones, their homes and/or pets. They may worry about these people and their wellbeing. This may impact on their own feelings of safety and security. Encouraging your children to explore ways of helping others can be very helpful.
- Let your children and adolescents express their emotions. Promote the development of empathy, coping skills and problem-solving skills. One important way for adults, children and adolescents to reduce stress is to do something. They may want to write to a school that has been affected or send a donation to help the victims.
- By taking action and getting involved, children and adolescents know that parents/carers are working with them to make a difference. This can assist them to feel safer and more positive about the future. Doing something helps children, adolescents and parents/caregivers to have hope.

In times of adversity, HOPE is the most valuable gift we can give to our children, our adolescents and ourselves.

Every
child,
every
opportunity