

Children and youth in disasters

Providing support and assistance within the school community

Overview

Exposure to disasters can have life-changing consequences. Although many community members fully recover after a disaster, pre-existing routines are often disrupted. As a result, various aspects of life can be affected as 'normal' routines are replaced with improvised crisis routines. This can put individuals and families at risk of compromised health and wellbeing while community cohesion may be reduced.

Understanding unusual and disturbing experiences requires impressions to be digested and processed. This is best done by communicating in a secure and supportive social network. It is important to encourage open communication (in all forms - talk, writing, drawing, play, drama etc.) about the experience and how it changes through the recovery. This means making it safe to do so and helping everyone understand the emotions that come when it is first expressed is part of the digestion and relieves tension. Emotional distress subsides with calm, confident support and usually results in feeling better.

For school staff and leaders working in an affected community, it is also essential to assist students, families and carers to recognise, minimise and adapt to the effects of the disruption caused by a disaster. Equally important is developing an understanding of students' unique disaster experiences and the amount of impact. Sometimes students will not or cannot verbalise their experience, with effects being more 'visible' through changes in emotion and behaviour. Therefore, it is important to talk with students and ask them questions to comprehend the individual framing of their disaster experience.

This handout provides an initial context for those working in a school within a community impacted by a disaster.

Authors

- Dr Rob Gordon – Clinical Psychologist & Independent Consultant
- David Younger – Clinical Psychologist & Independent Consultant
- Dr Sharon des Landes – Clinical Psychologist
- Kate Lewer – Registered Mental Health Occupational Therapist

POST-DISASTER CONTEXT

- Assistance and support are often provided by professionals who typically work with adults.
- These professionals may be anxious about the wellbeing of children and youth.
- They may over or underestimate child and adolescent capacities.
- Children and youth are frequently unable to communicate their needs.
- Assumptions may be made based on an adult perspective.
- Student needs may be inadvertently devalued if they do not fit adult/school priorities.

Essential resources for healthy development include:

- family and familiar adults
- peers, friends and other familiar children/youth
- security and safety for self-expression
- time to express and reflect
- privacy and a bounded world
- routines and a predictable world
- attention, interests, love
- challenges within developmental capacities.

The impact of disasters includes:

- threat to life, attachments
- separation from family, home
- loss of people, places, pets, possessions, landscape
- loss of routines, security, and comfort zone
- exposure to high arousal and extreme states
- helplessness, unprecedented emotions
- activation of reflexes and survival mechanisms.

CHILD AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT DICTATES DIFFERING LEVELS OF SUPPORT

- Development requires dependency on adults.
- Children and youth maturing, both emotionally and cognitively.
- They do not have the range of experiences adults do to make sense of what has happened.
- They might have limited adaptive capacities, and there is the potential to distort and misunderstand. As such, they may require support to comprehend/understand their world.
- Attention from adults and the support of the school community is vital.

Responses in children that indicate a need for support include:

- re-experiencing the event, fear of recurrence
- disorganised or confused behaviour
- somatic complaints – head or stomach pains
- hyperarousal in behaviour, emotions or body
- disruptive or angry behaviour
- anxiety or sadness, crying, worrying about others
- inability to concentrate, learn
- clinging and regressed behaviour
- withdrawal, detachment, avoiding talking or thinking
- any significant change in behaviour or emotion following the disaster.

Responses in young people that indicate a need for support include:

- anxiety, depression, anger, fear, guilt, disillusionment
- fears and foreshortened sense of future
- loss of meaning and motivation
- retreat into or from peer group
- withdrawal from family/peers
- avoidance of pleasurable activity
- substance use, thrill-seeking, defying
- any significant change in behaviour or emotion following the disaster.

STRATEGIES TO LIMIT IMPACT AND DAMAGE

1. **Reduce separation:** people, places, friends, possessions, community, and animals.
2. **Engage the student:** so, they can begin to express their experience and understand what they experienced – through talk, play activity, and continue this periodically through the recovery.
3. **Manage emotion:** reduce distress, engage emotions, provide comfort, and protect from exposure.
4. **Help the student:** make choices, express needs, and give power.
5. **Maintain:** involvement in normally enjoyable activities.
6. **Media:** monitor and manage the extent to which media coverage of the bushfire is accessed. View only what is necessary.
7. **Climate change:** for younger students aim to keep the topics of personal recovery and climate change separate. For adolescents, explore their narrative about the disaster – this may include the topic of climate change.