

Emerging Minds Families

FACT SHEET

12 tips to support your child through drought

This resource offers simple, practical tips to support your child through a drought, with a focus on child mental health and wellbeing. It has been developed with the guidance of family members with lived experience, practitioners and researchers.

Definition

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. In our resources, the term 'parent' encompasses biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising children.

Children will respond to the experience of drought in different ways, depending on factors like their age, coping skills and where they're at in their development. It's important to remember that caring parents and a stable routine are two of the biggest factors in supporting your child through this experience. And you're the expert – no-one knows your child better than you do. The things that you intuitively feel will often be the most important, like knowing when your child needs an extra cuddle and a chat about how they're feeling, or what might lift their spirits.

During times of stress, it can also be helpful to think about other ways you can support your family. With this in mind, here are 12 tips to help you support your child through drought.

1. Look after yourself

You have a vital role to play in helping your child get through this drought. An ongoing traumatic event like a drought can often leave people feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, frustrated, stressed or angry.



Compassion fatigue – when you don't have the mental or emotional capacity to support others because you're tired or struggling yourself – is also common.

You may be used to putting the needs of your family and community first, but it's important to remember that you can't pour from an empty cup. Looking after yourself is essential when it comes to helping your child to build resilience and positive mental health during this challenging time. So please seek help if you need it – from your general practitioner (GP), health professional or a parent support helpline (find a list at the end of this resource). Watch the video [What is a GP?](#) to learn more about their role.

2. See things through their eyes

Try to imagine the drought from your child's point of view. Think back to how you responded to a difficult situation at their age. Keep in mind that while your child might share some of your concerns, they may also be worried about things that seem insignificant to you. For example, they might be concerned about whether there will be enough food to feed their pet dog when they hear conversations about low stock feed levels.

Thinking about the drought from your child's perspective might help you to understand some of their responses and behaviours. It might also help in starting conversations about what they're feeling and how you can help.

3. Make space and time to talk

Make time on a regular basis for you and your child to talk about their thoughts, feelings and concerns. Let them know it's OK for them to share these worries with you – no matter how big or overwhelming they might seem.

Sometimes your child won't have the words to describe their emotions, or they may not feel like talking. Drawing and play can be great ways for your child to express their feelings. Find time to sit with them and follow their lead during these activities. In these moments, reassure them that their feelings are normal, and that they will come and go.

4. Look for changes in your child's emotions and behaviour

As well as talking to your child, it's important to continue to be on the lookout for changes in their emotions, behaviour, mood and sleep patterns (including the presence of nightmares). Children respond to stress in different ways. While most have a natural level of resilience, a small number will find the impacts of drought more difficult to deal with. If your child's difficulties are impacting their daily life, or they appear to be very anxious or sad, it's important to seek professional advice from your GP or a health professional.

5. Be a positive role model (but don't expect yourself to be perfect)

All families argue and get frustrated with each other. And the physical and mental demands of caring for a child while navigating a drought can be challenging. You may feel angry, sad or overwhelmed at times. If you've had a bad day, lost your temper or broken down, know it's OK (and perfectly normal).

Being kind to yourself and practicing self-care is vital when caring for others. Take some time to yourself and come back together when you're feeling calmer. Talk to your child, apologise if necessary and be honest with them about how you're feeling. Make sure they know that none of this is their fault and that your feelings are caused by the drought. In doing so, you'll be teaching them how to manage their own emotions. Remember, as adults it's our responsibility to nurture the relationship with our children and to heal it when it's been hurt.

6. Maintain a calm and connected environment

Make time and space to be a family whenever you can. Normalcy and consistency, while not always possible, will help children feel that things won't always be this hard. Sit down to a shared meal, help your child with their homework, join them in their games, or create special movie night traditions.

7. Don't stress if you don't have all the answers

If you're stuck for words, try saying something like, 'I can't answer that, but I love you to bits and we're going to get through this.' The number one thing children need in any situation is to feel safe and loved, and you hold the key to that.

8. Keep them connected

Your child's mental health and wellbeing will benefit from fun times with family and friends, doing activities they enjoy. We know this can be tough when you're busy or struggling, but a fun day out doesn't need to be expensive and can really boost your child's mood.

Ask your child to help you brainstorm some fun, low-cost or free activities you could do together, such as a backyard camping trip, a sleepover at their friend's house, or a family bike ride. Activities that take them away from reminders of the drought can be especially helpful.

9. Give them choices and opportunities to help

The ongoing uncertainty that a drought brings can lead to a sense of powerlessness. And it's tough for children of any age to see their parents worrying, especially when they can't 'take away' the problem. Giving your child choices and age-appropriate tasks, and asking for their opinions can help them to feel more empowered and positive about their circumstances. It can help them to feel like they're contributing to the family, and gives them a chance to highlight their strengths and build their sense of self.

Even younger children are generally very good at making suggestions and sharing their thoughts. As for the decisions, they can be as simple as letting your child choose what to watch on TV that night or asking if they would like sausages or chicken for dinner.

10. Ask friends and family for support

If you're concerned about your child's mental health and wellbeing, ask trusted friends and family to help by giving your child extra time and attention. You'll find that many people want to help, but don't want to intrude.

Children really benefit from close personal attention, particularly one-on-one interactions. It might be a neighbour spending time teaching your child crafts or practicing sport with them, or a special weekly call from a favourite relative. These things help children to feel connected and looked after, and can reduce some of the pressure on you as a parent.

11. Take time to reflect

As time goes on, support your child to reflect on what has changed since the drought began. Pay particular attention to any unexpected positives that have occurred. You don't need to pretend that there haven't been great difficulties; but try to focus on any strengths in the community, like how people have come together to support one another. By focusing on any new skills or achievements, you will help your child to feel more hopeful and in control.

12. Focus on a positive future

It is important to remind yourself and your child that this drought will pass. Keep planning happy activities together, even if it's just driving into town or visiting family and friends. Make a list of things you are all looking forward to when the drought breaks. It will help you all to stay positive.

This resource contains content adapted from resources originally co-developed by Emerging Minds and the Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network/ Australian National University as part of the [Community Trauma Toolkit](#).

Where to get support

If you or someone you know needs immediate help, please call 000.

Healthdirect's national health Service Finder can help you to find a GP, counsellor, psychologist or other health professional in your local area.

www.healthdirect.gov.au/australian-health-services

Lifeline offers free crisis support 24 hours a day, seven days a week. You can call Lifeline on 13 11 14, text 0477 131 114 or chat with a trained crisis supporter online.

www.lifeline.org.au/crisis-chat

Suicide Call Back Service provides 24/7 telephone, online-chat and video counselling to people at risk of suicide, those bereaved by suicide and carers of someone who is suicidal. Call 1300 659 467 or visit the Suicide Callback Service website.

www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au

Kids Helpline offers free 24/7 support for both parents and children. You can call Kids Helpline on 1800 55 1800, chat with a counsellor online, or email Kids Helpline.

kidshelpline.com.au/get-help/webchat-counselling

13YARN is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-run crisis service. Their Crisis Supporters are available to yarn whenever you need them (24/7) – just call 13 92 76.

www.13yarn.org.au

The Raising Children Network has a comprehensive list of national and state-based parent support helplines and hotlines.

Visit raisingchildren.net.au and search 'Parent helplines and hotlines'.