

# Emerging Minds Families

## FACT SHEET

# Supporting toddlers and primary school-aged children through drought

This resource offers parents practical strategies for supporting their children through drought. It explores how drought can impact children's mental health and wellbeing and what parents can do to help. 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.

In times of drought, it's normal for parents to work more, worry more, talk more about finances and be irritable at times. But we tend to underestimate just how much children, even toddlers, are affected by the ongoing stress and uncertainty that comes with a drought. If you're worried about the impacts of the drought on the young children in your life, the following strategies can help.

### Look after yourself

We know this might sound impossible when you've got so much on your plate. But as a parent, your behaviour and moods have a direct impact on your child in terms of their stress levels, and their relationship with you.



As you navigate your own emotions and experiences of the drought, it's important to be aware of how they're perceived by your child. We know that children of all ages pick up on their parents' emotions, even when they're not spoken about. Common things your child might notice is a change in your tone of voice or facial expressions when you're anxious or angry, and changes in your behaviour, like working longer hours or talking more about finances.

Society often gives parents the message that they're meant to be self-sacrificing. This can make parents feel guilty for even thinking about taking time out for themselves. But your long-term wellbeing is crucial to the family unit. If you can find a way to take your mind off the stress of the drought, it will help not only your state of mind and wellbeing, but your child's, too. This might include asking your support networks – family, friends, neighbours and care providers – to help by looking after your child while you do something for yourself.

Try to remember the things that helped you to relax or laugh before the drought – from exercise and music to watching TV, cooking or crafts. Remember, the best way to make your child smile is for you to smile first.

By taking time to focus on your own wellbeing, you will create a supportive environment for your family and provide space to make choices which help your child's wellbeing. These might include moving away from your teen when talking about finances or finding age-appropriate ways of sharing your emotions.

The resource [Looking after your wellbeing during a drought](#) offers more tips.

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**Babies pick up the stress and anxiety of the adults around them ... so we need to be watching, listening, trying to understand what young children are telling us through their behaviour.**

DR ANDREA BALDWIN,  
CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

## Put yourself in your child's shoes

What is your child seeing and hearing on a day-to-day basis? How might this make them feel? We know that young minds are shaped by interactions with family, friends and community. If you can try to see things through your child's eyes, it might help you to better predict their responses and behaviours, and also help them to navigate through these tough times. Ask your child direct (age-appropriate) questions about their experiences. For example, you might open a conversation with, 'Dad is feeling a bit angry it hasn't rained lately, what have you been feeling or noticing?'

Some days are particularly hard – for example, if you've had to put down cattle or say goodbye to friends leaving the district. Try to end these difficult days with something happy or fun – maybe a family movie night or sleepover in the lounge room. This shows your child that even on the hardest of days, there can still be things to look forward to.

For more advice, check out our podcast [Try looking at things through your child's eyes](#).

## Keep them talking

Remember to talk with your child often about what is happening, how you're both feeling and what they're thinking. Let them know you're available to listen to their concerns if they want to share them. If your child struggles to find the words to describe their feelings, you could invite them to write or draw in a journal instead, that they can choose to show you or keep private.

It's easy to let these regular conversations slip when you're busy and stressed, so some families set aside time once a week (say, after breakfast on Sunday) for a chat. This gives your child the security of knowing they can speak with you about how they are, or ask any questions. Some children also find it helpful to have a code word they can use when they have big worries on their mind, to let their parents know they need their care and attention. If your child doesn't want to talk about something one week, they at least know they can talk about their worries when they are feeling ready.

Children often get the message that they 'shouldn't worry' about the drought, but this isn't helpful. Your child needs to know they can talk about their worries and fears with you. It's also important to answer their questions as openly and honestly as you can. Children will make meaning of the situation using whatever information is available to them. Without the facts, they're more likely to misinterpret the situation and blame themselves for the drought.

## Open conversation checklist

Here's a handy checklist for opening up the conversation with your child:

- Be patient and accept all their answers about how they're feeling. Avoid responses such as 'stop being silly' or 'you don't need to worry about this'. A better response might be, 'It's OK to feel sad and worried, but we'll get through this together.'
- Answer their questions honestly, with age-appropriate facts. Older children may need more details than younger children. Reassure them that everything possible is being done to manage the situation.
- It's OK to admit you don't have all the answers. For example, you might say something like, 'I don't have the answer to that right now, but when I do have the answer, I'll let you know too.' Remember, in the vast majority of cases, you are the answer. Your child wants to feel loved and safe, and you're the key to that.
- Encourage conversations about all aspects of your child's life, not just the drought. Instead of asking your child how their day was (which generally sparks a one-word response) try asking what made them laugh or if they learned something new at school.

For more tips, listen to our podcast [Keep an open conversation](#).

## Maintain a calm environment at home

Create a calm, supportive space where your child feels safe and loved. Give them extra time, attention and support. Small children really benefit from one-on-one time with adults. We know it can be hard to find this time, especially when you have more than one child to look after. But even short, infrequent moments together can make a big difference for your child's wellbeing. You could also ask your child if there are any family members, friends or neighbours they'd like to spend time with.

During times of stress, it's easy for routines to slip. But normalcy helps children to cope with change and uncertainty. Try to maintain any family routines or traditions you had in place before the drought. Examples might include doing homework together, playing your child's favourite game, cooking together, or watching a family movie with popcorn once a week. These regular activities show your child that while things are tough at the moment, you can still make time for them.

## Be a positive role model

At times, the ongoing stress of the drought might bring up big emotions for you. While this is completely normal, it's important to remember that parental stress can flow on to affect children's mental health and wellbeing. Don't be hard on yourself if you have a bad day or get upset; instead, be honest with your child about how you're feeling and what you're doing to manage those feelings. For example, 'I'm feeling a bit stressed right now, so I'm going to go for a walk and get some fresh air – that always helps me to feel a bit better.' This will help to reassure your child that none of this is their fault, and can help them to make sense of what is going on. It will also teach them that it's OK to have these feelings, and give them some ideas as to how to manage them.

## Stick to your routines

Children thrive on consistency. While it can be tempting to allow normal household routines and rules to slip during times of stress (and that's fine for a short while), maintaining daily routines and setting gentle but firm boundaries is good for your child's mental health and wellbeing.

You might notice changes in your child's behaviour and emotions when they're feeling unsure, unseen or lonely, and are needing some extra care and attention. It's important to keep this in mind and look beyond your child's behaviour to try and understand the feelings behind it. For example, you can tell your child that it's fine to be angry, but it's not OK to bite their sister or break a toy.

Although keeping boundaries (and your cool) might be difficult when you're under stress yourself, maintaining these routines and rules will help to provide a sense of safety and stability for your child.

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**Finances are a big issue, but I always make a big point, whenever there's a local event on, we will go to it, even if it's up at Oodnadatta ... the kids love it, they get to spend time with their friends, run around and they talk about it for weeks afterwards.**

AMY, PARENT, SOUTH AUSTRALIA

## Stay connected

Unfortunately, isolation and drought tend to go hand-in-hand, as people turn inwards to cope with their feelings and avoid burdening others who are also doing it tough. While it can be helpful to step back from your community when you're feeling overwhelmed, staying connected over the long term is really important for the whole family's wellbeing and recovery. That's why you need to reach out to close friends and family now more than ever.

Play dates, no-fuss dinners and community events will help you all to forget day-to-day life for a bit. They provide an opportunity to speak with others who are going through similar experiences and to feel like you're doing something productive to help one another. It can also be a great way to learn the strategies other families are using to cope with the drought.

In the podcast episode, [Support your child's social connections](#), parents and practitioners talk about supporting children to maintain their social connections during a drought.

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**In times of drought, when people are stressed and under pressure, we need to make sure that there's light and fun and enjoyment in children's lives too. They have a right to play – and that's so important because that's the way kids learn how to navigate through the world.**

HELEN CONNELLY, SOUTH AUSTRALIAN COMMISSIONER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

## Let your child play

Children need time to play. It's a way for them to make sense of trauma and adversity and can lift their spirits during tough times. Play helps children to explore their feelings and vulnerabilities and can help them to work through their fears. It also helps them to learn important skills for their development, including social and emotional skills.

Make time for them to spend with friends and family, as well as time to pursue their favourite hobbies and interests. Try to keep up the routines of sport, music, fishing, dance – whatever gets them out and about with other people for a bit. This might not be easy when you're juggling work, community, family and personal commitments, so don't be afraid to ask family and friends for help and accept it when it's offered. They can often take your child to and from sports/events, so you don't have to and your child doesn't miss out.

South Australia's first Commissioner for Children and Young People, Helen Connolly, shares what she's heard from children and young people living through drought in the Emerging Minds podcast episode, [Rural children's voices](#).

## Empower them

It's tough for children to see their parents worrying, when they can't 'take away' the problem. It can leave them feeling powerless. But giving your child regular, age-appropriate tasks will encourage and empower them. It will help them to feel they are contributing to the family, and teach them how to manage hardship.

Ask your child what they would like to do to help – even younger children are generally very good at making suggestions and sharing their thoughts. Inviting them to contribute will build their sense of self and highlight their strengths. It will also give you an opportunity to praise your child on their successes and encourage them to work on things independently.

Learn more about the importance of giving children choices and asking for their opinions during drought in the podcast episode, [Give your child the opportunity to make decisions](#).

## Focus on the future

It's important to remind yourself and your children that this drought will eventually pass. We know this gets harder as time stretches on, but try to keep planning and doing the regular activities that make you all smile and forget about the drought for a few hours. Keep a list of what you're all looking forward to in the future. This will help your children to maintain a positive focus.

Listen to parents and practitioners talk about this more in the podcast episode, [Focus on the positive future](#).

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**Little children are not very future focused. Encourage them to look forward to something exciting that's going to happen soon, like a trip to town on the weekend, a visit to grandma next month. It's really important for them and for you to have things to look forward to.**

DR ANDREA BALDWIN, CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

## Signs your toddler, preschooler or primary school-aged child may need additional support

In times of stress, children respond in different ways. They may withdraw, stop paying attention, cry or throw tantrums, or find it hard to learn at school. They might display different behaviours, seem anxious, get angry at seemingly small things, or be more tense than usual. They might show a sudden interest in more adult topics or responsibilities, or become focused on scoring highly in their studies, sports or hobbies. They can also start showing behaviours typical of a much younger or older child. For example, a seven-year-old might suddenly start wetting the bed again, or an 11-year-old might adopt risky behaviours like drinking or staying out late.

Some children may seem fine at first, but then become distressed at a later point. Your child may need some extra support if they're having difficulties which:

- persist for more than a month or worsen over time
- represent a change from their normal behaviour
- are more intense or frequent compared to children of the same age
- cause their behaviours to disrupt their classroom/ others on a regular basis
- prevent them from engaging in age-appropriate tasks
- occur in multiple contexts (for example, both at school and at home)
- are making you feel distressed and concerned about your family's wellbeing.

Listen to our podcast, [Look out for changes in your child's behaviour](#) for more information.

## Who can help?

Your general practitioner (GP) is the best place to start – they can provide information, resources and advice on which type of professional support can best help your child's recovery. Learn more about the role of a GP by watching [What is a GP?](#) from Emerging Minds' *Practitioners speak* series.

Chances are you're also dealing with your own feelings of grief, anger and exhaustion. It can be tough to juggle your own responses with your responsibilities/roles as a parent, partner and community member. But it's important to remember that you can't pour from an empty cup. Taking care of your own wellbeing ('filling your cup') is key to your child's mental health and recovery.

If you need support, please reach out to a trusted friend, family member, GP or other health professional. You can also find more information and tips for taking care of yourself during this challenging time in our fact sheet, [Looking after your wellbeing during a drought](#).

### Useful resources for parents

**Birdie's Tree** offers a range of wonderful resources, in multiple languages, for toddlers and preschoolers who've experienced trauma. Developed by the Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health, it features games, information and an online storybook specifically for children who are going through a drought.

Visit [www.childrens.health.qld.gov.au](http://www.childrens.health.qld.gov.au) and search 'Birdie's tree'.

*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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://raisingchildren.net.au) and search 'Parent helplines and hotlines'.