

Emerging Minds Families

✓ DURING DISASTERS

Providing your child with emotional support during disasters

Immediately after a bushfire, flood, cyclone or other disaster, it's normal to feel overwhelmed and scared – both for yourself and your family. But children are significantly less likely to experience ongoing mental health difficulties if they receive support, comfort and reassurance from the adults around them at the earliest possible stage.

Comforting your child

Soothing babies and helping children to feel calm can reduce their stress response, which supports their future recovery.

- Use a happy but calm tone of voice and slow down your voice and body movements. Maintain open and loving body language by gently smiling with a relaxed face.
- Most children seek assurance from parents and family through physical touch, such as hugging, holding hands or leaning on you. Soothe your baby by holding them close and gently rocking them. They may be calmed by singing, gentle movement and rhythm, warm baths and swaddling.



Talking to your child about the disaster

- Have open, honest and age-appropriate conversations with your child about what's happening.
- Reassure them that there are people who are helping (e.g. emergency responders). Tell them what is happening and update them if plans change.
- Use simple language and concrete examples that they can understand. Avoid graphic or frightening details that could increase distress.
- Encourage them to ask questions, and express their thoughts and concerns about the disaster. Create a supportive environment where they feel comfortable sharing their feelings and asking for help if needed. Listen attentively to their concerns and validate their experiences, offering empathy and understanding.
- While encouraging expression is important, reflecting on potentially traumatic experiences can be distressing. Help create safety by telling children it's OK for them to express their feelings when *they* are ready and avoid pushing them to talk. You might say something like:

'I know that what happened was really scary, and it's OK if you're not ready to talk about it right now. If you want to talk later, I'm here to listen.'

Re-establishing predictability

Children (and parents!) can feel overwhelmed by the chaos and unknown impacts that are a result of disaster. Knowing what to expect can offer them a sense of control and familiarity. Maintaining routines and offering familiar objects can help restore feelings of safety and security.

- Where possible, keep routines or establish new ones, even when the circumstances are challenging. Examples include sticking to regular mealtimes, bedtime routines and familiar activities.
- Encourage your child to keep comfort items with them, such as a favourite toy or blanket. Familiar objects can provide children with a sense of security and predictability despite the uncertainty, and help foster hope that a 'new normal' is possible. If such items have been left or lost, you may be able to comfort children and provide them with a new focus by offering an item from the evacuation/relief centre.

Using play for distraction and expressing feelings

Play is a natural way for children to express emotions, connect with others, process their experiences, and engage in a normal activity amid chaos. It supports their emotional regulation and resilience during and immediately after stressful situations.

- Imaginative play, storytelling or even structured games can help children cope with stress. For example, offer toys like dolls or action figures that facilitate role-playing scenarios where your child can act out their feelings or re-enact comforting situations.
- Use interactive games to encourage collaboration and problem-solving. These can help distract children from distressing thoughts or circumstances, while fostering a sense that they have control and mastery over their environment. When few resources are available, simple games like 'Duck, Duck, Goose' and 'Simon Says' can engage children in play.

Modelling coping strategies

Practising certain coping strategies can be ideal for managing emotions and reducing stress. Once physical safety is restored, model these coping strategies yourself (see below) and encourage your child to try them whenever they're feeling sad, scared, anxious or overwhelmed.

Coping strategy examples

- Offer your child additional reassurance and warmth (e.g. extra smiles, cuddles, speaking in a calm tone).
- Try deep breathing exercises together, such as 'box breathing' (breathe in for the count of five, hold for five, breathe out for five, and hold for another five). Playing with toys like bubble bottles and wands are also ideal for regulating children's breathing.
- Practise mindfulness techniques such as the [five senses grounding activity](#) or progressive muscle relaxation.
- Encourage their creativity by offering your child colouring pens and paper for drawing or journaling.
- Participate in physical activities such as ball games and stretching to release tension.
- Sing to infants in a soothing way or lead a sing-a-long to your child's favourite songs.
- Read books together – such as your child's favourite stories or, when you both feel ready, books written to support and comfort children who have experienced a disaster (e.g. the [Birdie's Tree online or printed storybooks](#)).

Check in with yourself

One of the best ways to support your child's emotional wellbeing is to also look after your own. As a parent, you have an awful lot on your shoulders during and immediately after a disaster. But as the saying goes, 'you can't pour from an empty cup'. Check out our fact sheet [Looking after your mental health during disaster: A guide for parents for advice on caring for your own needs](#).

Getting help

Every child responds differently to traumatic experiences, such as disasters. If you're worried about your child's behaviour and things don't settle down in a week or two – or if you're having difficulty coping yourself – seek advice and support from your GP or family health professional.

It's important to remember that while children of all ages can be profoundly affected by traumatic experiences such as bushfires, floods, cyclones and other disasters, **most children will recover with time, care and reassurance.**

More tips

- [*Managing children's immediate reactions to disaster*](#)
- [*What to tell your children when you are a disaster first responder*](#)
- [*Protecting your child's mental health during disaster*](#)
- [*Looking after your mental health during disaster: A guide for parents*](#)