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National  
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Mental Health

## Keeping children and families in mind when reporting on disaster and community trauma events

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This fact sheet assists journalists and media staff to keep children and families in mind when reporting on disaster and community trauma events. The content is taken from [Keeping children and families in mind: Guidelines for media professionals reporting on disaster or community trauma events](#) and is designed to sit alongside the existing Australian media ethics guidelines ([Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance \(MEAA\) Code of Ethics](#) and the [DART Center for Journalism and Trauma](#)).

### The media's role

Following a disaster or community trauma event, the media acts as a crucial source of up-to-date factual information, working with local officials to communicate sites of coordination (e.g. emergency rally points), 'next steps' and/or public warnings. While most responsible reporters enter a community with the intent to 'do no harm', the many pressures on everyone involved can result in harm being caused regardless.

### What do we know about children and disasters or community trauma events?

- Although children are very resilient, they are also vulnerable in stressful situations such as those created by a disaster or community trauma event.
- Parents and carers are the best providers of physical and emotional comfort for their children during and immediately after a disaster or traumatic event.



- Children's reactions to disaster will depend on how their parents/carers and other adults around them react.
- Children can become 'invisible' as the adults around them are forced to deal with the immediacy of a stressful and sometimes dangerous situation.
- For some children witnessing the trauma or hearing about it will have as much of an impact as being directly involved in the event.

### How can you support children who have experienced trauma?

While you may not plan to interview children, the chaotic nature of disaster events means that you may come into contact with them regardless. Positive interactions can help children regain a sense of emotional and physical safety, comfort, calmness and security, and greatly assist with resilience, recovery and wellbeing.

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The following five strategies of [Psychological First Aid for Children](#) (based on Wraith, 2014) provide a practical and clear guide for you to have positive, supportive and empathetic interactions with children:

1. **Ensure safety** – remove the child from, or reduce exposure to the threat of harm.
2. **Keep calm** – provide a calm environment, away from stressful situations or exposure to sights, sounds and smells of the trauma events.
3. **Connect with others** – keep families together and keep children with their parents or other close relatives whenever possible.
4. **Encourage self-efficacy** – help families to identify their own strengths and abilities to cope.
5. **Have hope** – reassure the child that their feelings are normal, but assure them that things will be OK.

## Interviewing parents or carers

*When conducting interviews with parents or carers, remember that children need to be with their parents or carers immediately after a disaster or community trauma event.*

- Parents are the best providers of physical and emotional comfort for their children during and immediately after a disaster or traumatic event..
- Children are constantly looking to parents and other adults for guidance.
- Children are highly sensitive to how others (especially their parents) are feeling.
- Be aware that while children may appear to be preoccupied or some distance away from the interview, they may still be watching and listening.

### Guidelines for conducting interviews with parents or carers:

- Approach interviews and information-gathering from a foundation of 'harm minimisation'.
- Maintain a calm, non-threatening demeanour at all times.
- Introduce yourself and where you are from before you ask anything else.
- Ask people if it is a good time for them to be interviewed or give comment.
- Give interviewees autonomy in the interviewing process.
- Do not interview anyone who is highly distressed, in shock, scared, injured, or under the age of 16.

- Don't say things like 'At least everything is fine now', 'At least you survived', or 'It could have been worse'.
- Do not interrupt their story, but stop the interview if they become distressed or upset.
- Don't be alarmed if the interview does not go as planned, if people's minds wander, or if they become upset or angry.
- Do not feign compassion or sadness or tell them you know how they're feeling.
- Be committed to accuracy.

**REMEMBER:** How the media is received by an affected community and whether the impact is positive or negative will largely depend on how you report. The approach taken in reporting before, during and after a disaster can make a significant difference to affected communities and individuals. Being aware of this and using best practice reporting strategies can help minimise negative impact on others and can support recovery.

## What about when the disaster is over?

Media reports that repeatedly re-use footage of destruction or death can be extremely distressing and prevent families from moving forward. You can help create more positive and balanced coverage by covering some of the post-disaster rebuilding and recovery stories.

### Ongoing disaster (such as in cases of severe drought)

The guidelines above are equally relevant when working in communities experiencing ongoing disaster. Ongoing or sustained disaster, such as drought may leave a community struggling for a long time before it reaches a crisis point. In this stage there are less likely to be clear time periods, but rather an ongoing cycle where the situation may get better and worse.

This type of disaster can be just as destructive as a single-event disaster and requires ongoing status updates for people to be informed of the situation.

***This fact sheet is part of a suite of guidelines for journalists and media professionals. Find more resources in the [Emerging Minds Community Trauma Toolkit](#).***

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