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National
Workforce
Centre for Child
Mental Health

What parents and caregivers can expect during and immediately after a disaster or community trauma

Resource summary

- Children and adults are vulnerable to trauma.
- Parents who care about them and a stable routine are the main things a child needs to be okay after a traumatic event.
- There are many different responses to a disaster and these will be at their most intense in the first few weeks after a traumatic event.
- Children may experience distress even if they did not experience the event personally.
- Parents will also be dealing with their own grief and loss, and may need increased support to provide stability and routine for their children.
- All children need stability and support in this time, regardless of their personal experience.

All children need stable and supportive environments to grow and develop. Children look to their parents during a traumatic or stressful time to help them make sense of what has happened.

Reactions immediately after a traumatic event are intense and usually worst during the first few weeks.

The intensity of feelings that you and your children experience may fluctuate but will eventually regulate. Sometimes these intense feelings will return whenever you are reminded of the event.

Sometimes people think that infants, toddlers and very young children cannot be affected by traumatic events because they are either too young to remember it or don't understand what is going on. Unfortunately, this is not true; **all children, even those in utero, can be affected by the stress around them and become stressed in response.**



This resource was co-produced by:



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The National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health (NWC) is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health under the National Support for Child and Youth Mental Health Program.

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What can I expect?

When a significant event occurs, it affects the whole community and each individual member, including children, will have their own response. However, there are some common themes and behaviours that we see in children and adults following a frightening event.

What feelings might come up for me and my child?

There are a range of reactions to a traumatic event and no 'right' response. This time can involve lots of upheaval and stressful change at home and in the community.

Both adults and children often feel:

- intense emotions, that can change rapidly from fear, to anger, to sadness
- overwhelmed
- unsure what to do next
- worried, anxious or frightened
- despair or hopelessness
- burdened by responsibility
- angry, sad or numb.

As well as these feelings after a disaster or traumatic event, people often experience:

- intrusive thoughts and memories, e.g. worrying or negative thoughts or images that won't go away
- flashbacks (like a brief nightmare when you are awake) or nightmares about the event that make you feel like it is happening all over again.

Whilst these feelings of distress are very frightening for adults and children alike, they are a natural response to having experienced an overwhelming event. It is the brain's way of trying to make sense of what you have experienced and to 'process' these memories.

Experiencing this in the first few weeks is normal and does not mean you or your child will have ongoing problems. For the large majority of people, these bad dreams and flashbacks will naturally reduce and go away over time. If they persist for months after the event, or increase, it is important to seek support from your GP or local services.



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What behaviours might I see in my children?

Children often show a range of different behaviours following a disaster. These behaviours may go away and then come back and many children will show different behaviours in different contexts. For example, they may seem fine at home, but be very quiet and withdrawn at school when away from you, or vice versa.

Some of the common behaviours you may see in children include:

- agitation, anxiety or distress
- refusal to speak or co-operate
- a 'frozen' or 'spaced out' look
- trouble concentrating or paying attention
- changes in sleeping or eating
- not wanting to play with friends or do sport
- refusal to go to school or be away from parents
- crying, shouting or fighting
- playing 'disaster' or 'death'
- new fears or old fears coming back
- fussiness or clinginess
- acting in ways that are normally too young or too old for them.

Reactions by age group

Younger children aged 0-5 years, may:

- wet the bed or have new or increased fears of the toilet
- fear the dark or have nightmares
- have more tantrums or resist instructions
- have trouble speaking or listening.

Children aged 6-8 years, may:

- do things they used to do when younger, like bedwetting or tantrums
- think the event was their fault
- fear that the disaster will happen again or that people around them will die
- believe things that aren't true, i.e. 'if I go back to school it will flood again'
- not want to do sport or other activities.

Children aged 9-12 years, may:

- show a new awareness of death or want to talk about death and destruction more than usual
- have anxiety around previously normal activities, like eating or talking to others
- show disdain or anger with authority
- not want to do sport or other activities.

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