

# Emerging Minds.

National  
Workforce  
Centre for Child  
Mental Health

## 11 ways parents and caregivers can support children in the longer term following a disaster or community trauma

It is important to be aware that children may need ongoing support in the months and even years after a disaster or traumatic event. Whilst most children do recover in time, ongoing difficulties can continue to challenge some children.

It is important that children are given the time they need to recover.

Recovery doesn't always follow a predictable path. While some children who are significantly impacted in the early months improve with time, it takes others much longer. Some children can appear to have minimal effects immediately following a disaster but can begin to feel distressed at a later time.

It is hard to predict what will happen for each individual child, but there are some steps you can take to help support each child's recovery, minimise the likelihood of ongoing difficulties and connect them to the support they need.

- 1. Continue to check in with your child about how they are feeling.** Initiate the conversation and tell them that it can take a long time to feel better after a very frightening event. Let them know you are happy to speak to them about this. Children can often get the message that they should be 'moving on'. This can make them feel isolated if they are not feeling okay and they can presume that everyone else is. It can be helpful to set aside a particular time to catch up with your children, a weekly one-on-one walk or small activity. This gives children the security of knowing that each week they can speak to you about how they are, the good things and the worrying things.
- 2. Be on the lookout for changes in behaviour and mood.** As well as speaking with your child, it is important to continue to be on the lookout for changes in behaviour and mood. As the months pass after the event most children will adapt to
- 3. Be open with your child about how you are feeling.** Share with them what has helped and be honest about how it is hard for you, too. Normalise the feelings of distress but remain positive that, with support and time, things will get easier.



their 'new normal'; however, a significant minority of children (studies suggested between 20–30%) will need extra support. If your child is showing some of the post-trauma stress symptoms detailed or appears to be very anxious or sad, it is important to seek professional advice as they may benefit from additional support.

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- 4. Talk to each child about their experience of the event.** Remember each child has their own experience, including children within the same family. It is helpful to talk about this together, widen the conversation to speak with extended family members or friends who can share their different experiences and how they got through hard times and what they found helpful. Children can sometime feel more comfortable speaking with adults other than their parents, particularly if they think that talking about the event is upsetting for them, e.g. 'every time we talk about the event, mum cries and dad goes quiet.'
- 5. Ask for support.** If you are concerned about your child's recovery, ask for support to help give your children extra time and attention. It can be difficult to ask for help, but many people want to assist but don't want to intrude. Children really benefit from close personal attention, particularly one-on-one. It could be a neighbour spending some time teaching your child about gardening or a special weekly call from an uncle. These things help children feel connected and looked after and reduce some of the burden on parents.
- 6. Don't expect perfection in yourself or your children.** If things have gone badly, you've lost your temper or broken down, that is okay. Speak with your children afterwards, apologise if necessary and reassure them that they are safe and loved. It is very difficult to see your child continue to suffer, and the physical and psychological demands of caring for a distressed, sleep-disturbed child are great. All families experience arguments and frustration; however, it is really helpful if you can work to 'repair' afterwards, that is, come back together when things are calmer, chat and provide comfort and reassurance. Remember, as adults, it is our responsibility to nurture the relationship and to heal it when it has been hurt.
- 7. Maintain (or establish) a connection with your child's day care or school.** It is important to be able to have communication between you and your child's day care or school so you can get a full picture of how your child is recovering. Children can seem perfectly fine at home but display worrying behaviour at school or vice versa. Communication can also help make sure any issues your child is experiencing are responded to sensitively and consistently, so they know what to expect both at home and out of home.



- 8. Encourage your child to continue or return to activities that they enjoy.** Particularly those that involve community connection like sports or music. If they (or you) do not have many connections outside the home, try and build new ones. Research has shown that when children and families are involved in their community through groups like playgroups or community events their wellbeing is enhanced. But be cautioned – spreading yourself too thinly to help everyone can have the opposite effect.
- 9. Support reflection and conversation.** What has changed since the event? Pay attention to any unexpected positives. Do not pretend there have not been great difficulties but focusing on new skills or strengths in the community and in ourselves can help us feel more hopeful and in control.
- 10. Take time to check in with yourself.** This is not an indulgence, but a priority. Our children are not okay if we are not okay. If you are feeling exhausted, overwhelmed and very anxious or are suffering any post-traumatic stress symptoms it is critical you seek extra support. Parents often put themselves last thinking this is best for their families, yet we know that children are very sensitive to adults' wellbeing. They can sense stress and are affected if we are unable to 'connect' and be engaged with them. This often comes out in more challenging behaviours that just makes things more difficult. If there is one thing you do for your children, it should be to make your wellbeing a priority.
- 11. Focus on strengths and hope.** We are all good at something and enjoy particular things. It is really beneficial to encourage your children and yourself to do things that bring joy and a sense of accomplishment, and to plan things to look forward to.

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