

## A guide for first responders: supporting child and family preparedness for disaster

As a first responder you are well aware of the importance of preparation for individuals, families and communities. However, the focus of preparedness is often on practical preparation. It is also important to prepare yourself and your family psychologically. This is key to supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of all members of the community, including its children.

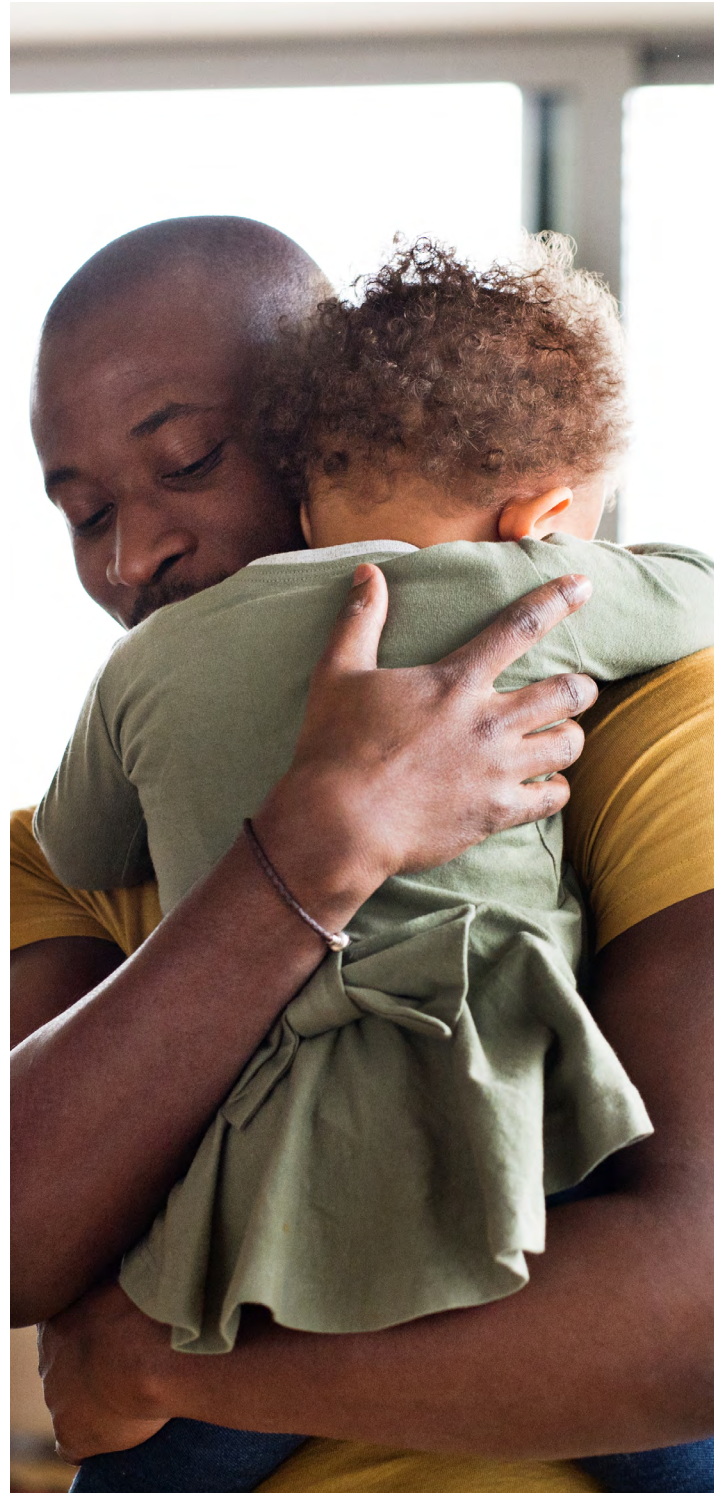
### Why is it important to prepare?

- All children, even infants can be affected by disaster.
- Children are particularly susceptible, given their physical and emotional vulnerability and reliance on adults for protection.
- The impacts of traumatic events on children's wellbeing can go on for months or even years.
- The chances of children having ongoing difficulties are significantly reduced if they receive support, comfort and reassurance from the adults around them.

Preparedness helps you and your family members to work together to get ready practically and emotionally for a potential disaster. While you may feel very confident about how to manage in an emergency, it is also possible or likely that in the event of an emergency you will be called in to work, and your family will be implementing the plan without you.

Ensuring that your family can execute their plans in your absence is very important. Working together to prepare for this can increase your family's confidence and ability to deal with a disaster, to think more clearly and to act according to the household emergency plan should something happen.

Psychological and physical preparation are closely linked and both are important.



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Being prepared practically

- Know your emergency contacts and keep them somewhere that’s easy to find.
- Know where, how and when to get help.
- Know where you can get up-to-date reliable information about the disaster.
- Gather facts and information about the threat.
- Access critical information about warnings and actions to take.
- Get the things together that you may need to take with you ahead of time. This could be passports, money, credit cards, important contacts, medicines and photographs. If you have them ready in the one spot, then it will be faster for you to collect them.
- Sit down and talk with all members of the household, including children (regardless of age), to create a family emergency plan (e.g. what you might do if you have to stay in your home, where you might go if you can’t stay at home, what you will do with your pets, what if parents are at work and the child is at preschool, etc.).
- Discuss your emergency plan regularly with the members of your household and keep it somewhere where everyone can see it.

Being psychologically prepared

- Know about the risks and what you can do – this helps you to deal with disasters more effectively should they occur.
- Prepare yourself psychologically so that you feel more in control and are aware of what to expect.
- Know that feeling worried and stressed is normal and that you can manage the stress and fear by learning how to identify feelings, bodily responses and thoughts, and by having coping statements such as “I can cope with this, we know what to do.”
- Learn breathing exercises to slow down breathing and keep calm.
- Help your children to identify and label their feelings and teach them how to slow breathing down to help them manage any panic or overwhelming feelings.
- Listen to children’s concerns and check in with any misperceptions and correct them.

Talking to your children

Lots of people think that if they talk to their children about the potential threat of a disaster then they will scare or traumatised them. In fact, talking to your child openly and honestly, and letting them know that you are prepared and have a plan, helps them to feel safer and more secure and will also help them to deal with the impact of a disaster if it does happen.

Also speak to your children about the role you might play in an emergency. Give your children age-appropriate information about:

- who is going to be available to take care of them in your absence
- where they will be taken care of.

Take the time to answer any questions they may have and reassure them that you are trained to respond to these situations.

How to talk to your children about disaster preparedness

Tell children that disasters can happen and if all members of the family know what to do, it will help everyone keep safe. We will know what to do, when to do it and who can help us. It’s important for adults to stay calm and speak with confidence when discussing the family emergency plan. This will help to reduce your children’s worries.

Allow children to ask any questions or make any comments they may have about disaster preparedness. This will help you to understand what needs clarification and dispel any misconceptions they may have.

Don’t catastrophise or over-dramatise. Assure children that with preparedness, things will be less scary and a lot safer.

Children may want to go over the ideas more than once depending on their age – follow their lead, let them speak about it or ask more questions and check in if they are worried about something happening soon. If they are worried, let them know that this is normal. Show acceptance of their feelings but let them know that you are not worried about anything happening yourself and your planning will help if it does.

Benefits of involving your children in disaster preparedness

- Your child is likely to feel more able to deal with the threat and feel safe and secure in knowing that you have a plan.
- Your child will be able to tell you what is most important for them to take with them in the event of a disaster.
- Your child will know that even if they are affected by a disaster, you and your family will use your resources to work together.

Don’t forget the pets

Pets are members of your family too, so thinking about what you will do with your animals is an important part of disaster preparedness. In the event of a natural disaster, most local councils will have somewhere that you will be able to take your animals where they will be safe. Knowing where this is and thinking about how you will get your animals there should be part of your disaster preparedness plan.

Telling your children that you also have a plan in place for their favourite pet will also be reassuring for them.

You may be lucky and never be affected by a disaster. However, we know that if you are affected, and you are prepared, the physical and psychological outcomes for you and your family are likely to be much more positive.



High Five Model of Psychosocial Preparedness

1. Know the risks	2. Connect with others	3. Identify your strengths	4. Learn what to do in an emergency	5. Look after your life
				
Knowing about the risks and what you can do helps deal with a disaster more effectively should one occur.	Connecting with people can assist in dealing with the threat and protect people from adverse mental health. Connectedness helps families to get through the tough times.	Identifying strengths raises awareness of your own ‘tools’ or resources which you and your family can use. These may include a variety of thinking, feeling and coping strategies.	Psychological survival skills and practical actions work best together.	This means not letting the disaster, or preparations for a further threat, take over. The regular patterns of everyday life provide strong frameworks to see you through.

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