

A guide for first responders: supporting children immediately following a disaster

In the immediate aftermath of a disaster or other traumatic event, first responders are vital to their community's recovery. Those around them look to them for guidance, reassurance and advice about what to do, and what is going to happen next.

While first responders are trained for these practical tasks, they are also key to supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of the members of their community, including children.

In times of disaster and chaos children can often be separated from loved ones, and first responders step in to support their safety. While some first responders find this 'second nature', others are less confident in how to interact and support children in these circumstances. Some first responders report that they avoid or minimise interacting with children for fear of doing the wrong thing or making things worse.

The ability of first responders to support children in the immediate aftermath of a disaster or other traumatic event is crucial for many reasons:

- 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 effects 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 at the earliest possible stage.



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Key things to do to support children after a traumatic event or disaster

Many first responders have been trained in **Psychological First Aid**. These principles are helpful for all people in times of crisis but remember that children have unique needs and vulnerabilities.

What does this mean in practical terms?

Protect children:

- from further harm
- from traumatic sights and sounds
- from onlookers and media.

Be kind but firm in directing children:

- away from the event site
- away from injured survivors
- towards help and support.

Keep children together with family and friends whenever possible.

What to do if children are in acute distress

- Offer physical support, take a hand, sit next to them. Infants and younger children may need to be held in order to be soothed.
- Stay with them until they are calm.
- They may shake.
- They may babble.
- They may become mute.
- Their behaviour can change rapidly:
 - loud crying
 - anger
 - sitting completely still or frozen.
- Try to be tolerant of difficult behaviour – what is going on around them is too much for them to handle at this time.
- Help them with their strong emotions – tell them that you know it is frightening but that you are there to help them.

Small acts help children feel safe

- Holding their hand or sitting close to them.
- A quick hug.
- A reassuring word.
- Information on what is going to happen next.
- Asking a little about the child, their name, their favourite things.

Supporting your own family

In the midst of a disaster or emergency, first responders are focused on the community at large. However, it is important to give attention to the children within your own family/network at these times.

While children are often full of pride for the role their loved ones play in the community, they are also very aware of the dangers involved. It is important to give children information and support so that they don't have to deal with this on their own.

If you are called on to respond to an emergency:

- Give 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
 - when you expect to return (as much as you know).
- Try to take some time to answer any questions they may have.
- Reassure them that the adults are trained to respond to these situations.
- Remind them of things that they can do if they are feeling worried or overwhelmed; for example, calming activities, deep breathing, listening to music.

When you return from assisting in an emergency:

- Try to take some time to answer any questions they may have.
- Reassure them that the adults are trained to respond to these situations.
- Help them if they are feeling worried or overwhelmed; for example, calming activities, deep breathing, listening to music.
- Give children age-appropriate information about:
 - what is going to happen next
 - who is going to be available to take care of them in your absence if you have further duties
 - where they will be taken care of
 - when you expect to return (as much as you know).

Psychological First Aid for children

| Ensure safety | Keep calm | Connect with others | Encourage self-efficacy | Have hope |
|--|--|---|--|--|
| | | | | |
| Remove the child from, or reduce exposure to the threat of harm. | Provide a calm environment, away from stressful situations or exposure to sights, sounds and smells of the trauma event. | Keep families together and keep children with their parents or other close relatives whenever possible. | Help families to identify their own strengths and abilities to cope. | Reassure the child that their feelings are normal, but assure them that things will be ok. |

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Challenges

As a first responder you are often faced with confronting and distressing situations, in particular when there has been mass destruction and/or loss of life. Returning to family life can be very difficult, where day-to-day challenges and issues may seem irrelevant or inconsequential. Compared to what you have seen 'in the field', family fights, tantrums and demands can seem petty and indulgent.

Many workers struggle with 'compassion fatigue', which is a term that describes the experience of having little left to give in terms of understanding or support for those around you when you have been dealing with great levels of need and distress in your work/other roles.

Things often get worse when adults are emotionally 'unavailable' to children. You may keep yourself separate, for example, or be in your 'own head' and preoccupied with other priorities. When this happens, your children's behaviour can escalate, and they can become increasingly demanding as they try to get their needs met.

This can manifest in more challenging behaviour, defiance or emotional outbursts. We often respond to this by feeling frustrated and seeing this as inappropriate 'attention-seeking' behaviours. In fact, what is happening is children are seeking our support, comfort and help in managing their feelings.

Importance of caring for yourself

It can be challenging to be continuously looking after the needs of others. Your own needs can easily be overlooked or put on the backburner. However, it is important that you take steps to look after your own wellbeing, so you can continue to support those around you.

It is important to attend to your self-care and that of your family. Putting in place strategies for self-care is essential for first responders.

Some essential tools for this include:

- linking into peer supports
- engaging in stress reduction activities
- seeking opportunities to reflect on your experiences with your professional colleagues.

Case example

Matthew is a 38-year-old firefighter who has been out assisting in the clean up after a fire destroyed several properties in their local area.

When I got home my kids were jumping all over me and I just wanted some space. When I walked off the little one threw a wobbly and started yelling and crying at me. I couldn't believe it. Here she is, with everything she could want around her, being a brat. While I've spent my day with a family who have lost everything ... I was so angry I just stormed out.

Later my wife and I chatted about it, she said something that made sense. She said that the kids don't know what I see every day, and that is a good thing. They don't know what horrible things happen to other kids, and they shouldn't have to yet.

She's right. I don't want them to know what I know. They're only tiny. So I suppose I can't get cranky with them for not getting it and for being kids. I'm lucky the worst they have to deal with is arguments over toys or bedtimes. It's easy to lose perspective I suppose.



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