

A guide for first responders: supporting children in the long term after a disaster or community trauma

In the months and years after a disaster or traumatic event you may continue to work to support recovery in your community. It can be helpful to have a basic understanding of how events can affect children, and what sorts of responses and behaviours can help support children's wellbeing and reduce the chances of them having ongoing difficulties. Below, we also discuss how you can support your own children and family.

How are children likely to respond over time?

- The majority of children will see their symptoms decrease gradually over time and eventually resolve.
- A minority of people, including children, may develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from the event.
- There is some evidence that children are more at risk of developing PTSD if their parents/carers are experiencing severe post-traumatic stress symptoms or have PTSD.
- Children may struggle with other mental health difficulties such as depression and anxiety or physical symptoms such as having trouble sleeping or unexplained aches and pains. They may need a referral to see a specialist for support.

What role can first responders play in supporting children's recovery?

For the broader community

In the months and years following a disaster or traumatic event, first responders can continue to play a role in supporting children's wellbeing and recovery.



First responders are often highly visible in the community due to their equipment, vehicles and uniforms. This attracts the attention of children and can provide opportunities to support them.

As always, if you see or come across children and young people, follow your normal protocols around safety but also:

- Look for opportunities to connect with them – with a wave or a smile.
- If you are speaking to children, give them age-appropriate information about what you are doing, and how this will help their community.
- Provide reassurance about how the adults are trained and experts at this and are all working to keep the community safe.
- Tell parents that children can ask you questions and you will do your best to answer them.

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In the aftermath of a disaster, the sights and sounds of emergency vehicles and even uniforms might be frightening to children. It can remind them of the event and they may be fearful in response.

If this does happen, it is best to give the child some space, and for adults to calmly give words to the child’s feelings – “Oh, I think the sounds of the sirens made you feel a little scared. Let’s turn them off.” “I wonder if seeing all of us adults in uniforms reminds you of the scary times when the waters got really high?”

Community events can provide the chance for first responders and the whole community to connect over some fun and relaxation. They also give children a chance to interact with first responders in a fun environment, rather than just linking them with the frightening event.

Partnerships with schools and first responder organisations to provide education and support around preparedness and recovery can also build beneficial links and help children to feel connected and safe.



Support for your own family

It is important to be aware that your children may need ongoing support in the months, even years, after a disaster or traumatic event. While 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.

Here are some tips to support your children:

1. Continue to check in with your child about how they are feeling.

Tell them that it can take a long time to feel better after a frightening event and that they can talk to you about this. Set aside a particular time to catch up with your children, a weekly one-on-one walk or small activity.

2. 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 their ‘new normal’. However, a significant minority of children (studies have suggested between 20–30%) will need extra support. If you are worried about your child, seek additional support. Your GP is a good place to start.

3. Be open with your child about how you are feeling.

Be honest with them about how hard it has been for you and share with them what has helped you. Let them know that with support and time, things will get easier.

4. Remember, each child has their own experience of the event, including children within the same family, and it can be good to talk about this.

Sometimes, children feel more comfortable talking to adults other than their parents, particularly if they think talking about the event is upsetting for their parents (e.g. ‘Every time we talk about the event Mum cries and Dad goes quiet’).

1 McDermott, B. M., & Cobham, V. E. (2014). A stepped-care model of post-disaster child and adolescent mental health service provision. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 5, 10.3402/ejpt.v5.24294. <http://doi.org/10.3402/ejpt.v5.24294>

5. If you are struggling to give your child the time and support you think they need, ask others for help.

It can be difficult to ask for help but many people want to assist, they just 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.

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 OK. Speak with your children afterwards, apologise if necessary and reassure them that they are safe and loved.

7. Maintain (or establish) a connection with your child’s day care or school.

This helps you to 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.

8. Encourage your child to continue or return to activities that they enjoy, particularly those that involve community connections such as 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 such as playgroups or through community events, their wellbeing is enhanced. But caution!! Spreading yourself too thinly to help everyone can have the opposite effect.



9. Have conversations about what has changed since the event, including any unexpected positives.

Acknowledging that there have been difficulties but focusing on new skills or strengths in the community, and in ourselves, can help us to feel more hopeful and in control.

10. Focus on strengths and hope.

It is really good for you and your children to do things that bring fun and a sense of achievement, and to plan things to look forward to.

11. Take time to check in with yourself.

This is a priority. Our children are not OK if we are not OK. If you are feeling exhausted, overwhelmed and anxious or are suffering any post-traumatic stress symptoms, it is critical for you to seek extra support. Parents often put themselves last, thinking this is best for their families; however, children are very sensitive to adults’ wellbeing. They can sense stress and suffer if we are unable to ‘connect’ and engage with them. This often comes out in more challenging behaviours, which just makes things more difficult. If there is one thing you must do for your children, it should be to make your own wellbeing a priority.

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