

## A guide for first responders: supporting children in the short 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.

### How are children likely to respond?

**The majority of children will be fine.**

You can expect the majority of children to recover over time from some initial sadness, worry and distress. All children will need continued reassurance, stability and support from you and those around them.

**Some children will struggle and need extra support.**

Some children will continue to experience difficulties that may not get better by themselves. They may need extra help to learn ways to cope with more severe symptoms. Your GP is the best place to start for advice on this.

**All children need time, love, patience, care and stable routines in the months following a traumatic event.**

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

#### For the broader community

In the weeks and months 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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A note of caution, while children are often thrilled to sit in emergency vehicles or have the chance to play with sirens at school visits, for example, 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

In the weeks and months following a disaster your family and loved ones are also in the process of recovering and making sense of what has happened. Here are some basic steps you can take to help support their recovery and protect them from having ongoing difficulties.

### 1. Listen and attend to your children carefully.

Speak to your children about how they are feeling after the event. Check in with them over time – more frequent, shorter conversations are better than one-off chats. Allow them to ask questions about your role as a first responder and take their worries seriously, don't dismiss them.

### 2. Give children reassurance.

Let them know that it is normal to still feel upset after such a big event and that you are there to help them through this.

### 3. Continue to be on the lookout for changes in behaviour.

As the weeks go by, initial distress will begin to pass. However, if things aren't getting better, it is important to seek extra support for yourself and your child.

### 4. Model the skills you want to see in your child.

Share with them about how you are coping. Be honest about how hard it has been for you and what has helped you. Let them know that with supports and time things will get easier.

### 5. Understand each child's unique needs.

Everyone experiences distressing events differently, including children within the same family. Talk about this together, focusing both on hard times and what is helping. Children can learn from this and see that it's OK to feel differently from others.

### 6. Give your children extra time and attention.

This can be difficult when families are recovering and demands on adults are high. However, children need close personal attention to know they are safe. It doesn't have to be elaborate or lengthy, the important thing is for children to feel connected to you and to know you can find time for them.

### 7. 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 still safe and loved.

### 8. Help your children return to a normal routine.

It can be tempting to allow normal rules to slip but children do best when things are predictable, clear boundaries are set and followed, and they know what to expect.

### 9. Support children to re-establish their social connections.

At first, children can feel unsure about being away from you, or worry about what to say if friends ask them questions about the event or if they start to feel overwhelmed. Role play with your child(ren) ways to answer questions that help them feel OK and safe, and rehearse ways for them to seek help with their emotions. Put a plan in place and start with shorter play dates.

### 10. Take time to look after yourself.

This is not an indulgence but a priority. Our children are not OK if we are not OK.

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