

# Helping Children After A Disaster



There are a wide variety of reactions that children can experience during and immediately after a disaster.

Parents and Caregivers can support children to cope and manage their reactions and adapt to the changes in their environment.

## Re-establishing family routines

Re-establishing routine to the extent possible after a disaster is important for family recovery. Parents can do this by trying to maintain family routines such as meal times, bedtime, wake time, reading time and play time, and to set aside time for the family to enjoy activities together.

## Allowing differences in reactions to the disaster

Family members may need to work at developing a mutual understanding of their different experiences and reactions to the disaster. Family members can help each other by talking about what is bothering them, listening and trying to understand, comforting with a hug, or getting things off their mind by playing a game.

Parents need to pay special attention to how their children may be troubled by reminders and hardships, because they can strongly affect how children act and behave. Common responses experienced by children include:

## Changes in Sleep Behaviour

Trouble sleeping, fear of sleeping alone, bad dreams, or demanding to sleep with parents. Reassure your child she is safe, allow them to share their bad dream and explain that bad dreams are normal and they will go away, if needed support the child to understand the difference between dreams and real life.

Provide calming activities before bedtime, tell a favourite story with a comforting theme. Let your child sleep with a dim light on or sleep with you for a limited time, make a plan with your child to return to normal sleeping habits.

## Change in eating behaviours

Stress affects your child in different ways, including her appetite. Eating healthfully is important, but focusing too much on eating can cause stress and tension in your relationship. Relax, usually as your child's level of stress goes down, her eating habits will return to normal. Make meal times fun and relaxing. If you are worried you child has lost a significant amount of weight, consult a pediatrician.

## Feeling scared or fearful

Fears of going to sleep, being by self, being separated and fearing being unprotected are common post disaster. Children can also fear the event might happen again. Help them to share their worries and give them realistic information. Keep your child from media coverage of the event that can trigger fears of it happening again. Be as calm as you can with your child, try not to voice your own fears in front of your child. Reassure them they are safe.

## Managing emotions

Children may experience fear of being overwhelmed by their feelings or find it difficult to express feelings. Support the child to express feeling and link to what has happened put common feelings into words such as anger sadness and worry about the safety of parents friends or siblings, provide safe place to express fears, anger, and sadness. Allow children to cry or be sad don't expect them to be brave or tough.



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## Returning to earlier behaviours

Children can experience temporary loss of abilities or skills recently learned, and return to earlier behaviours such as thumb sucking, bed wetting or baby talk. Remain neutral or matter of fact, as best you can, as these earlier behaviours may continue for a while after the disaster. Don't allow anyone to criticize or shame the child.

## Behavioural issues

When children feel unsafe they become more controlling than usual. This is one way of dealing with fears. Allow your child control over small things, if he has control over small things it can make him feel better. Balance giving choices and control with giving structure and routines. Altered behaviour may include, aggressiveness or restlessness or an increase in tantrums. Support your child by naming feelings and supporting them to find ways to express their feelings through talking, drawing, or play. Encourage recreational activities and exercise as an outlet for feelings and frustration, express fears, anger, and sadness. Allow children to cry or be sad don't expect them to be brave or tough.

## Loss and Change

When a disaster brings so much loss to a family and community it is easy to lose sight of how much the loss of a toy or other important item can mean to a child.

Grieving for a toy is also your child's way of grieving for all you had before the disaster. Allow your child to express feelings of sadness, use physical comforting such as hugs, hand holding, or time in your lap

## Confusion about what happened

Give clear explanations of what happened whenever your child asks. Avoid details that would scare your child. Correct any misinformation that your child has about whether there is a present danger. Remind children that there are people working to keep families safe and that your family can get more help if needed. Let our children know what they can expect to happen next.

## Support at PPC Worldwide

PPC Worldwide can also help support you emotionally through counselling in times of need and explore possible strategies that will assist you to re-balance your life as soon as possible.

Through your EAP, you have access to confidential, professional and free counselling. If you wish to talk, please call to make an appointment on:

**Australia - 1300 361 008    New Zealand - 0800 327 669**

For more details on our services, visit our website: [www.ppconline.info/au](http://www.ppconline.info/au)

**Sources:** National child stress traumatic network, 2nd edition