

Floods and Other Catastrophes: Helping Kids Cope

The trauma experienced by children as natural disasters strike and in their aftermath can be quite significant. Even those not directly affected by the catastrophe may be worried about loved ones and/or exposed to a great number of disturbing images through the media.

It is important to be mindful of what our children see, and as is the case of those who are directly affected, there are a number of warning signs to help us recognise traumatic reactions.

How do families help children who have been affected by natural disaster?

The Australian Psychological Society says that special attention should be paid to children's needs. Children are a particularly vulnerable group following a disaster. Parents and caregivers should try to acknowledge any upset they may be experiencing while also reassuring their children that, as a family, they will be able to cope with the adversity caused by the floods or other disasters.

Reactions can vary greatly. These reactions can include sleep disturbances, clinging to parents, change in appetite, aggressive behaviour, withdrawal, or other reactions. Thankfully, most children will subsequently experience healing and recovery after painful experiences and develop new strengths.

Parents and loved ones have an important role to play in this process, and there are age-appropriate ways to help lessen the stress. Children under five are heavily influenced by their parents' reactions, while children from 6-11 are able to understand loss and permanent change and are prone to high levels of anxiety. Children over 12 have similar reactions to adults.

It is suggested that parents let their children know about their own feelings, and explain that it is normal to be upset. Allowing children to express their feelings without judgement is important, but they should not be forced to do so. Reassurance is the key, along with positive future plans. Also, sticking to regular routines as much as possible is also very helpful.

How do parents explain/ deal with how their kids are exposed to distressing news events?

We asked Dr. Wayne Warburton, who is a lecturer in developmental psychology with the Macquarie University (Sydney) [Department of](#)



**It's not the floor shaking, Darling
it's just your nerves.**

Psychology and the Deputy Director of their Children and Families Research Centre offers the following tips.

1. The first tip is to take control, as much as you can, over what your children see. Use the DVR etc to record helpful current affairs and news programs such as Behind The News on the ABC and try to avoid children having exposure to material inappropriate for them to deal with at their age. If you are unsure what is appropriate, be conservative. There are also helpful sites. The Australian Council for Children and the Media site website (<http://www.childrenandmedia.org.au>) has comprehensive reviews of children's movies and clear advice on what is developmentally appropriate for children. Another excellent site is the Center on Media and Children's Health (<http://www.cmch.tv/>) at Harvard.
2. Try to avoid children being exposed to media immediately before bed. Ask them to stop playing games, stop watching TV or movies, or listening to music for an hour so before bed time. Help them use the time to engage in relaxed and positive activities that will encourage good sleep.
3. If children do see or hear frightening material, sit down and talk about it with them. Note the low likelihood of something frightening and similar happening to them, and explain why. Discuss the sensationalist aspect of news – media typically reports on what interests people, and on the worst part of the events. Listen to what your child says to get a clear idea of what it is exactly that is upsetting them, and then deal with that aspect directly. For young children, or where the child cannot really understand the nature of what has upset them, emphasise that you and other adults have control over their immediate environment, care for them, protect them and look out for them. In essence, let them know that the 'grown ups' have things under control, and the child doesn't need to worry.
4. Often, there are positive things that children can do in response to upsetting news events. For example, if a child was upset about seeing images of the February 2009 bushfires and the January 2011 floods, parents could, after talking through the events, discuss with the child how they might help. The child might decide to send a toy to an organisation housing homeless victims or ask parents to make a donation on their behalf. This not only deepens the child's understanding of what has happened, but empowers the child and restores a sense of agency and control.

Information on natural disasters and emergency management for kids can be found on the EMA website. These innovative resources teach kids about the important work that local emergency service agencies, volunteer groups and non-government organisations are doing to help Australians cope with disasters. <http://www.ema.gov.au/schools>.