



## Helping children who have been affected by floods

Information for parents and caregivers

Hundreds and sometimes thousands of people every year are affected by floods around Australia. A large number of these are children who may have suffered major disruption, losses, or lived through frightening experiences. Many other children have been affected indirectly, through hearing about the floods or knowing someone who has lost their home. These can all be challenging experiences for children. This information sheet will outline some strategies you can use to help children recover from a flood.

### Impact of disasters on children

Children cope with distressing situations such as disasters in different ways, just as adults do. There is no one 'standard' pattern of reactions that we should expect children to follow. However, children are not always able to describe and express their emotions in the same direct way that adults do and therefore often do not show the same reactions to stress as adults. It is important to look out for changes in children's behaviour that suggest they are unsettled or distressed, such as:

- changes in their play, drawing, dreams or spontaneous conversations
- regressive behaviour – children behaving younger than they normally do
- talking constantly about the floods
- anxiety about sleeping alone, trouble getting to sleep, or having nightmares
- irritability or anger
- tantrums
- eating less/more, fussy eating, tummy or other aches
- withdrawing from others or wanting to stay close to a parent
- problems concentrating at school.

Children are usually resilient and for most children these reactions will gradually reduce over time with the support of families.

## How you can help children recover

After a traumatic event, **children need comfort, reassurance and support, and to know that they are safe and are being looked after.** Try to spend more time with your children and provide them with plenty of affection through cuddles and hugs.

**Ask your child how they are feeling about the disaster, in case they are unsure how to talk about it.** Sometimes children can better express their feelings through play than through words, so make time to play with them. Keep in mind that disruptions to daily life such as not going to school may bring up difficult memories from other disasters or COVID-19 lockdowns. Letting children be more dependent on you while you re-establish daily routines, like mealtimes, bedtimes or returning to school, can be helpful.

**Find out what your children know** in case they have mistaken ideas or facts about the floods, and correct any misconceptions. Keep your responses appropriate to the age of your child and appropriate to the child's level of understanding and emotional maturity. Young children often need reassurance more than facts.

**Listen to your children's concerns.** Listen closely to what they are asking or saying, and think about whether they are looking for factual information, or if the questions are expressing anxiety about the floods. Try to keep your own feelings to yourself when talking about their feelings. Let them know that you understand how they feel and that their reactions are normal and that they are safe.

**Monitor how much your children are being exposed to media stories of the floods.** Children can become re-traumatised by watching repeated images on the television and it is best to try to shield them from the media.

**Be aware of how you talk.** Adults need to be conscious of the presence of children when discussing the floods. It is a good idea not to let children overhear adult conversations about worrying things if they cannot join in at their own age or stage of development.

And most importantly, **look after yourself** as it is likely that you have also been distressed by the experience of the floods. When parents are feeling cared for themselves they are better able to respond to the needs of their children.

## Seek additional support when needed

While most children will bounce back after distressing experiences, some children may show prolonged difficulties and could benefit from professional assistance. Children who are at risk of developing more lasting problems are those who have experienced significant disruption and losses, those who have developed problems in response to past traumas, or had pre-existing existing problems. Warning signs of more significant and lasting distress in children include:

- continual and aggressive emotional outbursts
- serious problems at school
- preoccupation with the floods
- intense anxiety or emotional difficulties.

A qualified mental health professional such as a psychologist can help such children and their parents or caregivers to understand and deal with the thoughts, feelings and behaviours associated with the distress of a flood.

If you are referred to a psychologist by your GP, you might be eligible for a Medicare rebate. You may also be eligible to receive psychology services via telehealth so that you do not need to travel to see a psychologist. Ask your psychologist or GP for details.

There are number of ways to access a psychologist.

You can:

- use the Australia-wide Find a Psychologist™ service. Go to [findapsychologist.org.au](https://findapsychologist.org.au)
- ask your GP or another health professional to refer you.

You may also wish to visit the Australian Parenting Website Raising Children for further support and resources: <https://raisingchildren.net.au/>

The APS has a number of resources available to assist Australians during disasters. Visit [www.psychology.org.au/for-the-public/Psychology-topics/Disasters](https://www.psychology.org.au/for-the-public/Psychology-topics/Disasters)




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