



Talking to children about natural disasters



The recent bushfires in Australia have had a significant impact on the country. Natural disasters, including bushfires, drought, cyclones and floods, are traumatic and can shape childhood experiences, as children may be directly impacted or indirectly by being exposed to media coverage.





Trauma can change how a child makes sense of the world and how they fit in.

How each child processes traumatic events can be very different and may become noticeable in behaviours that seem unrelated to the event.

As an educator, you're in a unique position to play a critical role in supporting children after a natural disaster by creating a safe environment and by being responsive to their needs during recovery, both in the short and long term. This includes talking to children about the event.

Educator wellbeing

It's important to understand what impact natural disasters can have on children's mental health and wellbeing, as well as on your own. Feeling overwhelmed and a sense of loss of control can be natural reactions. To be able to give support to children and their families, you need to ensure you look after yourself. The Be You website provides more information on educator wellbeing following a natural disaster.

What to look for

Being dependent on adults for their safety adds another potential layer to the trauma a child may experience following a natural disaster. Trauma and coping strategies will also depend on the child's age, developmental stage, experiences and family context. Children express themselves through the way they behave so observing them, looking out for behavioural changes and signs of distress can guide you in your response and support. The Be You website provides more information on the signs to look for that indicate a natural disaster could have impacted on a child's mental health.

Observing behaviour

For children, it can be challenging for them to explain their feelings. They may not entirely understand what they're experiencing. Observing children's behaviour could tell you what they might be feeling. To document and gather observations about a child's behaviour over time, use the Be You BETLS observation tool. BETLS is an acronym for behaviour, emotions, thoughts, learning and social relationships. The tool provides you with a structure to reflect on a child's wellbeing, behaviour and social interactions. For children who don't express themselves verbally, it's important to check their behaviour closely when:

- Responding to trauma
- Identifying if a child is at risk of mental health issues
- Providing appropriate support

Talking

Talking can assist children to make sense of the event. Provide opportunities for conversations so they know they can talk to you. Ignoring or pretending the event didn't happen can do more harm. To support children in understanding and processing natural disasters, encourage them to express their emotional experiences, verbally or through other means. They may need help in naming and identifying their feelings. Assist with visual cues such as cards that show emotions.

Some children may decide not to talk about the event, and this needs to be respected. Don't push it. Other children may ask lots of questions. So tune in, follow their lead, listen, and be calm, sensitive and compassionate in your responses. Be honest and clear when answering their questions – it's important not to overwhelm them with details. Use developmentally appropriate language that children understand and only give the information the child has requested – when they are ready they will ask for more information.



Art and craft provides children with an opportunity to express their emotions.



Play

Through play, children can revisit events in a safe environment and under their control. As children play, you might notice them repeatedly retelling their story. It's important to listen to them calmly. They might also recreate their understanding of the experience, expressing their feelings as they re-enact what happened. Observe their play and let them lead how you are involved and to what extent you explore and imagine with them.

Other creative activities

You can also provide an opportunity for children to express their feelings through creative means such as drawing, painting, clay or playdough. Have books about feelings available to them. Create a quiet space for children to use when they need it and provide comforting toys.

Be mindful of changes

Children who have suffered trauma are sensitive to changes. Maintaining familiar routines with familiar people can reduce stress and help children feel safe, although this may be challenging given current circumstances. Warning children about change in advance can lessen their anxieties and fear.



If you would like support from a Be You Consultant, register your learning community with Be You, which is a free, government-funded initiative. Go to beyou.edu.au > Register



Resources

BETLS Observation Tool

beyou.edu.au/ > Resources > Tools and guides > Be You Mental Health Continuum & BETLS observation tool

Bushfire Response resource pack

beyou.edu.au > Bushfires and mental health > Resource pack

Educator Wellbeing after a Natural Disaster fact sheet

beyou.edu.au > Resources > Fact sheets > Grief, trauma and critical incidents > Educator wellbeing after a natural disaster

How to Provide Support after a Natural Disaster fact sheet

beyou.edu.au > Resources > Fact sheets > Grief, trauma and critical incidents > How to provide support after a natural disaster

Impact of Natural Disasters on Mental Health fact sheet

beyou.edu.au > Resources > Fact sheets > Grief, trauma and critical incidents > Impact of natural disasters on mental health

Responding Together online learning modules

beyou.edu.au > Learn > Responding together