

Disaster preparedness

Learning communities are well-placed to support children and young people to prepare for disasters.

Preparing children and young people for a disaster, while being prepared yourself, encourages them to be active participants.

This can support recovery and resilience in your learning community.

How preparedness helps

Preparedness can help children and young people build resilience and get ready to experience and cope with a traumatic event in the community such as a bushfire, flood or other disaster.

Three benefits of preparation:

- Helps children and young people get ready with practical actions and prepare emotionally.
- Helps children and young people feel more safe, secure and confident in their learning community, and in other environments.
- Develops their ability to manage during a natural disaster or other traumatic event in the community, and supports recovery.

Your preparedness

Children and young people react differently to frightening situations, and they can be influenced by how the adults in their lives respond.

As an educator, being able to manage challenging emotions well is one of the most important ways you can support a child or young person's recovery and resilience during a natural disaster.

This means looking after your own wellbeing is important and supports your own preparedness.

Two types of preparedness

Preparedness involves practical and psychological strategies, which you can teach to children and young people, or use yourself.

Practical preparedness

Practical preparedness is about ensuring the whole learning community knows what to do when faced with an emergency.

Practical strategies might include these:

- Making sure your service or school's main emergency contacts are available to staff and families.
- Displaying your learning community's emergency and evacuation plan somewhere prominent.
- Practising emergency drills and evacuation procedures regularly. Consider providing additional support for children and young people who may feel distressed by alarms and evacuations.
- Involving children and young people in planning when, where and how to get help in an emergency.
- Allocating helpful tasks to children and young people to do in the event of an emergency, to support their sense of agency and purpose.

The [Australian Red Cross RediPlan preparedness program](#) offers educators a series of downloadable lesson plans about emergency preparedness.

The [Pillowcase Program](#), another Australian Red Cross initiative, helps children aged 8 to 10 to prepare for and respond to an emergency.

Psychological preparedness

Psychological preparedness helps children and young people understand how they might feel and respond during a disaster, which can support them to feel more in control and more able to cope.

AIME (Anticipate, Identify, Manage, Engage) is a four-step process to being psychologically prepared:

Anticipate

Anticipate the reactions you, and members of your learning community, might have in the lead-up to a disaster such as a bushfire, flood or other emergency event.

Feeling worried or anxious is normal. Explain to children and young people that they can learn ways to respond to these feelings as they occur.

Identify

A key part of preparedness is identifying specific physical feelings in response to stress, anxiety or fear, and the accompanying thoughts.

Support children and young people to identify and label these physical reactions (such as trembling, feeling sick or needing to go to the toilet) and the accompanying thoughts ('I'm scared' or 'I don't know what to do').

Reassure them that these signals and thoughts are a normal response to fear or anxiety, and there are things they can do to feel more in control.

You can use a range of activities, such as discussion groups, role play, drawing or stories to help children and young people notice their thoughts and feelings.

Manage

Help children and young people manage these responses by understanding what they can do to feel better. For example, using controlled, slow breathing exercises or using self-talk to replace thoughts such as 'I don't know what to do' with ones such as 'I know how to stay calm, and we have a plan.'

Engage

Encourage children and young people to engage with someone they trust when they start to feel upset or frightened.

Having a trusted person to talk, share their concerns with and receive support from is important and can help them feel safe, supported and less isolated.

Encourage children and young people to identify adults in their life that they trust, and to think about how they would connect with them for support if they're worried or concerned.

Talking about disaster preparedness

These are helpful suggestions for talking to children and young people about disaster preparedness:

- Explain that disasters can happen and that being prepared will help keep everyone safe.
- When you're discussing emergency plans, stay calm and speak confidently.
- Create an environment where children and young people know it's okay to ask questions. Be aware that they may want to go over things more than once.
- Be mindful that some children and young people won't want to talk or express what they're feeling. Allow them to open up in their own time.
- Acknowledge the feelings of children or young people who may feel worried in conversations about preparedness. Reinforce that planning and preparedness will help.
- Impart a sense of purpose and optimism for the future in your conversations about disaster preparedness plans. For example, highlight the ways in which your learning community, or the broader community, are working together – and celebrate milestones and successes.

The *Birdie's Tree* stories and games developed by the Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health are designed to help a young child work through their experience, while also giving them a sense of action and control.

Be You resources

For professional development to support children and young people after a natural disaster or other traumatic event in the community, see the [Natural disasters and other community trauma](#) and [Therapeutic Storytelling](#) modules of the Be You Professional Learning.

For resources to look after your own wellbeing, see [Wellbeing tools for educators](#) on the Be You website.

External links

[Curriculum mapping: Disaster resilience education in the Australian Curriculum](#), Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience

[How educators can prepare their students for a natural disaster](#), Emerging Minds

[Preparing for natural disasters: How to prepare psychologically for natural disasters](#), Australian Psychological Society

