



# How to provide support after a natural disaster

Learning communities and educators play an important role in supporting children and young people after a natural disaster.

## The role of learning communities

Natural disasters can have a [significant impact](#) on both individuals and communities, as these events – and circumstances which may follow – are often traumatic. Children and young people are especially vulnerable to the emotional impacts and often rely on adults around them to provide support, information and protection.

**While families are the main source of support and comfort for children and young people during these times, learning communities also have an important role to play.**

The learning environment can provide a sense of familiarity and support for children and young people when many other parts of life might seem uncertain or out of their control. This is because they're familiar environments and can offer a sense of predictability and safety. This sense of stability can assist children and young people to manage their emotional responses and learning community connections.

## Create a safe space for children and young people

Creating a safe space within your learning community helps you to provide timely and appropriate support. Following a traumatic event, the routine, structure and normality of a learning environment can assist children, young people and their families to manage and work through the emotional difficulties. For the recovery process to begin, it's important for communities to try to resume normal routines as soon as possible, while acknowledging the impact of the event on individuals. Creating a safe space where children, young people and their families feel comfortable seeking help is critical for recovery.

## Support mental health: notice, inquire, provide

**It can sometimes be hard to know when to seek extra support.**

If you think a child or young person is struggling to cope after a natural disaster, or if you notice that their everyday functioning is being impacted, you might like to check in and see how they're going.

**Notice** – pay extra attention to any changes in the behaviour of children and young people in your learning community. You know them well, and how they were before the event, so you're well placed to notice any changes in the days, weeks or months afterwards. Noticing if changes get worse over time is also a good indicator that a child or young person needs help.

**Inquire** – sometimes it can be difficult to know what to talk about following a natural disaster. Noticing and listening to children and young people gives them the opportunity to explore these emotions and reach out for help. Being aware of the potential difficulties a child or young person might face when trying to talk about their experience of a natural disaster is important. Inquire and give them a space to talk about their thoughts and feelings, bearing in mind that some individuals will find this difficult.

**Provide** – there are many different types of support available to support children and young people's mental health and wellbeing, and sometimes it's difficult to know how to act or what specific role to take. Schools and early learning services should have established policies and procedures in place to guide you once you've observed a concern. Speak to your leadership team about the available support options, and take the time to learn more about the available support services within and around your learning community.

Learn more about providing [early support](#) for mental health issues in the Be You Professional Learning. The [Emerging Minds Community Trauma Toolkit](#) provides information and resources on how to deal with the immediate, short-term, long-term and ongoing impact of a natural disaster.

## Tips for supporting children and young people after a natural disaster

- Pay special attention to a child or young person who you know has been affected by a natural disaster – keep in mind that they may have been affected directly or indirectly.
- Continue with normal routine as soon as possible without ignoring that the event occurred.
- Provide a safe space for children and young people to speak to you. Let them lead the

conversation and be prepared to listen even if you can't offer any advice.

- Answer questions in a developmentally sensitive manner, so that their questions and concerns are addressed but they're not exposed to unnecessary content. Be flexible with your response to each child or young person as their needs will differ.
- Involve families in conversations, if possible. Be aware of supports that the child or young person has at home.

### A few things to avoid when providing support.

#### Don't:

- push children or young people to talk if they don't want to
- pretend the event didn't happen
- talk in detail about the event if the child or young person appears to be having difficulty with the content of this
- expose children and young people to unnecessary media coverage of the event or share images of the event
- take the child or young person to the site of where the natural disaster occurred, without prior conversation, as this could result in retraumatising through triggers
- make assumptions about how the child or young person is feeling or coping – it's better to ask them or observe behaviour patterns and changes.

If you're unsure, speak to your leadership team about what steps to take next or how you might manage or refer the child or young person to further support.

## Self-care

**A natural disaster can impact everyone in the community, and you might find yourself also dealing with your own emotions and ways of coping after such an event.**

You might also be managing your own recovery and the recovery of your family following a disaster. Learn more about [self-care following a natural disaster](#).