

SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUTH DURING NATURAL DISASTER EVENTS

Natural disasters include hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, wildfires, tsunamis, and floods, as well as extreme weather events such as blizzards, droughts, extreme heat, and windstorms. These events can lead to many adversities for children and families, including displacement, loss of home and personal property, changes in schools, economic hardship, loss of community and social supports, and even the injury and death of loved ones.

Tragic or traumatic occurrences can alter a person's sense of security. We know that children may be upset or have questions about what has taken place. The first and most important support for children and youth are their family. Below, is a list of ways that we can work together to create a safe environment for children and youth during this difficult time.

Be reassuring. Children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives. Your reactions are most important. Recognize that some children may be concerned about something bad happening to themselves, family or friends. Explain to them the safety measures in place and reassure them that you and other adults will take care of them.

Be a good listener and observer. Let children guide you to learn how concerned they are or how much information they need. If they are not focused on the tragedy, do not dwell on it. However, be available to answer their questions to the best of your ability. Young children may not be able to express themselves verbally. Pay attention to changes in their behaviour or social interactions.

Monitor the news. Images of a disaster or crisis event can become overwhelming, especially if watched repetitively. Young children may not be able to distinguish between images on television and their personal reality. Older children may choose to watch the news but be available to discuss what they see and to help put it into perspective.

Emphasize people's resiliency. Help children understand the ability of people to come through a tragic event and go on with their lives. Focus on children's own competencies in terms of how they previously coped in their daily life during difficult times. In age-appropriate terms, identify other critical incidents from which people, communities, or countries have recovered.

Highlight people's compassion and humanity. Large-scale tragedies often generate a tremendous outpouring of caring and support from around the country and world. Focus on the help and hopeful thoughts being offered to those affected by other people.

Maintain as much continuity and normalcy as possible. Allowing children to deal with their reactions is important but so is providing a sense of normalcy. Routine family activities, classes, after-school activities, and friends can help children feel more secure and better able to function.

Spend family time. Being with family is always important in difficult or sad times. Even if your children are not significantly impacted by this tragedy, this may be a good opportunity to participate in and to appreciate family life. Doing things together reinforces children's sense of stability and connectedness.

Ask for help if you or your children need it. Any tragedy can feel overwhelming for families directly affected, particularly those who have lost loved ones. Staying connected to your community can be extremely helpful. It may also be important to seek additional support from a mental health professional to cope with overwhelming feelings.

Communicate with your school. Children directly impacted by the event may be under a great deal of stress that can be very disruptive to learning. Together, parents and teachers can determine what extra support or leniency students need and work with parents to develop a plan to help student.

Be aware of your own needs. Don't ignore your own feelings of anxiety, grief, and anger. Talking to friends, family members, religious or cultural supports and mental health counselors can help. It is important to let your children know that you are sad. You will be better able to support your children if you can express your own emotions in a productive manner. Get appropriate sleep, nutrition, and exercise.

Informed by resources from:

Association of Chief Psychologists of Ontario School Board Psychological First Aid – National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Strategic Interventions - Points to Consider

1. Individuals closest to Ground Zero and others in the Impact Zone who are experiencing fear and hopelessness need to be grounded to circumstances they have control over. Instead of focusing on very broad issues (e.g. “what is wrong with the world and how do we fix it?”), the focus should be on micro-interventions and realities such as emphasizing safety in the local area:
 - a. Make sure families are wrapping around overwhelmed children and youth.
 - b. Expect some regressive behaviour.
 - c. Restate school safety protocols to students and staff.
 - d. Monitor media and social media exposure and show an interest in what students are seeing and posting themselves.
 - e. Be prepared to engage in impromptu child and youth initiated conversations.
 - f. Model calmness.
 - g. Be visible. School personnel intentionally connecting with students reduces anxiety.
 - h. Students may be gathering more after school hours to maintain a sense of connection. Leaving the school open, for as long as possible, during this critical period will contribute to lowering anxiety.

2. Parents and caregivers may need to be reminded that a child who appears to be overreacting may in fact be so overwhelmed with personal issues that the societal anxiety has simply “pushed them over the edge”. This is an important time to have meaningful conversations about resolvable issues to bring relief. Also, prompting the child’s favorite aunt, uncle, brother, sister, grandparent, etc. to make contact can help to increase that sense that at least “we are all right!”

Additional Resources

Anticipating that students may have a reaction to this event, we have collected some resources available for parents and educators that could be helpful in responding to children's concerns.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN):

https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//age_related_reactions_to_traumatic_events.pdf

Health Emergency Management – BC Mental Health and Wellness Recovery Toolkit:

<http://www.phsa.ca/health-emergency-management-bc-site/Documents/Mental%20Health%20and%20Wellness%20Toolkit%20January%202021.pdf>

BC Teachers’ Federation - Supports and resources for members affected by flooding and severe weather: <https://www.bctf.ca/whats-happening/news-details/2021/11/17/supports-and-resources-for-members-affected-by-flooding-and-severe-weather>

Emergency Management BC – Staying Safe and Healthy in an Emergency:

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/emergency-management/preparedbc/make-your-plan/health-in-emergency>

Canadian Mental Health Association: <https://cmha.bc.ca/documents/coping-with-natural-disaster-stress/>

First Nation Health Authority - Recognizing and Resolving Trauma in Children During Disasters: <https://www.fnha.ca/Documents/FNHA-Recognizing-and-Resolving-Trauma-in-Children-During-Disasters.pdf>

Red Cross: https://www.redcross.ca/crc/documents/well-being_links_20171002_en.pdf

Flood Specific:

PrepareBC Flood Guide: https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/public-safety-and-emergency-services/emergency-preparedness-response-recovery/embc/preparedbc/preparedbc-guides/preparedbc_flood_preparedness_guide_fillable.pdf

NCTSN Flood Response: <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/disasters/flood-resources>