

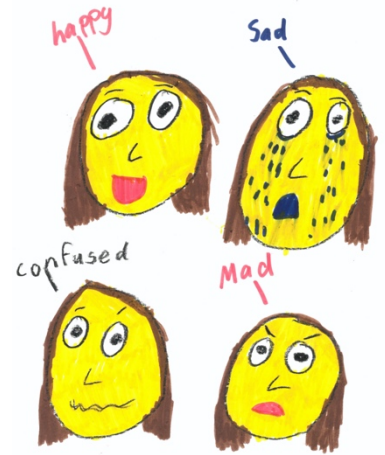
Talking about Emergencies

Kate Eastman

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Exposure to emergency situations can lead to anxiety and stress in a child's life. This exposure may be from experiencing an event first-hand, or from watching and hearing about it in the news, on social media, conversations with their peers or through overhearing discussions that take place around them. When faced with exposure to such traumatic events there can be an exacerbation of a child's fear response, which in turn places stress on their bodies. The type of response will vary between children, and will be affected by their level of exposure, their support systems and their internal coping mechanisms they have developed. This response may include increased anxiousness, a fear of separation from caregivers, withdrawn or acting out behaviours, insomnia or other behavioural changes. With time, these responses should reduce.

There are a number of things that you as a caregiver or educator can do to support your child through this period. It is important to have a response that is flexible and sensitive to the changing needs of your child, whilst also maintaining a sense of safety, structure and security for the child. Research has found that children who have caregivers who help them process disaster information have better coping strategies and an enhanced capacity for adjustment during this time.



PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

1. **Talk** - If your children are hearing about emergency situations or events on the news or in discussions, talk this through with them. Explain things to them in age appropriate ways that they can understand and in turn listen carefully to the questions they may have. Try not to dismiss their concerns but answer truthfully and contextually. If you overhear children discussing the emergency situation with their peers or others, encourage them to be discussing this with their caregiver.
2. **Reassure** - Provide reassurance that what they are feeling is an appropriate response to what they have witnessed or experienced. Help them to name these emotions.
3. **Routine** - Return to normal routine and structure as soon as possible. If this is not possible, discuss with your child these changes and highlight the things that will stay the same, for example, try and stick to the same bedtime routine even if living arrangements have temporarily changed.
4. **Safety** - Discuss with your child the safety plans that are in place for their protection. For example, discuss what the family bushfire plan is and what important role they have in this plan.
5. **Relationships** - Reassure your child that you are there and remind them of the other key relationships in their life that they can turn to for support. Ensure that you prioritise time with the child to strengthen the attachment.
6. **Response** - Assess your own reaction to the situation. It is appropriate for you to have an emotional response. However, try and avoid having this response burden your child. With older children, explain to them your emotions and how this situation is making you feel. Model and explicitly teach coping strategies to your child as this assist them in developing their own effective coping.
7. **Action** - Look for opportunities for children to be developing empathy and care for those affected. Discuss how you as a family could care and support others during this time.
8. **Support** - Seek professional support. Speak with your doctor if you or your child continues to experience an ongoing emotional response that is affecting everyday functioning. There are many resources and people out there that can provide this support when required.

FURTHER READINGS

- Emerging Minds, Community Trauma Toolkit, Available online at <https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/toolkits/community-trauma-toolkit/>
- Gibbs, L., Block, K., Harms, L., Macdougall, C., Baker, E., Ireton, G., . . . Waters, E. (2015). Children and young people's wellbeing post-disaster: Safety and stability are critical. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 14, 195 - 201. DOI: [10.1016/j.ijdrr.2015.06.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2015.06.006)
- Wisner, B., Paton, D., Alisic, E., Eastwood, O., Shreve, C., & Fordham, M. (2018). Communication with children and families about disaster: Reviewing multi-disciplinary literature 2015–2017. *Current Psychiatry Reports*, 20(9), 1-9. DOI: [o.1007/s11920-018-0942-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-018-0942-7)

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