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National  
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Centre for Child  
Mental Health

## How educators can help in the classroom

Educators often ask how they can help students who have experienced a natural disaster such as a flood, severe storm or bushfire. An educator's primary role following a natural disaster is to continue being a good educator. Children need to return to normal school routines as soon as possible and thrive on the certainty of knowing where they need to be and what they need to do throughout each day. Although educators may also play an important role in identifying mental health concerns in their students, your primary role should be focusing on continuing and supporting children's education. This tip sheet outlines important things you can do to help children affected by disasters.

### Monitor symptoms over time

Children will have very different responses following a traumatic event. It is therefore important for you to:

- be familiar with the types of reactions that children can have after exposure to a traumatic event
- remain vigilant and curious about changes in behaviour of any of the children in your classroom; and
- consider referring the child for further assistance if their emotional or behavioural difficulties are a change in functioning from before the disaster; continue for longer than one month; and/or worsen over time.

### Maintain routines

Most children respond well to structured environments with clear goals, timelines and activities. Therefore, continuing with familiar school, pre-school and day care routines is particularly important following a natural disaster. Routine helps to maintain consistency and predictability in one area of the child's life, reducing unnecessary stress and improving feelings of safety.

Ensure that children are made aware and prepared for upcoming events and activities. This may involve setting an agenda at the beginning of the day, week or month – and providing ongoing reminders. For older children, it is important to give advance notice of deadlines and major events (such as assignments, school carnivals), so they can plan for these events.



### Talk about the traumatic event

There is a common misconception that talking about the traumatic event can cause more problems or lead a child to develop distress reactions. Although it is important to consider how you talk to the young person who has experienced trauma (and what sort of reactions and coping strategies you model), talking about the traumatic event and the child's feelings does not generally lead the child to develop problems.

Tips for talking to children about the trauma or natural disaster:

- Place rules around 'disaster talk' to limit potential modelling of distress and inappropriate coping mechanisms (e.g. set 10 minutes at the start of class for talking about the disaster).

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- Contain any conversations which encourage fear. Remain calm and convey a clear message that the threat/danger is over, and that now the focus is on recovery and rebuilding.
- Schedule these sessions when you have some extra support in the classroom. An aide may provide support for both the educator and students if needed.
- It is very important for educators to maintain the 'educator' role as they support the child. Remember you can draw on other supports within the school if you feel a child needs extra support.
- Focus on positive changes, as well as the strengths and positive coping strategies the child has demonstrated since the traumatic event.
- For younger children, talking about the event may be difficult. Some children might respond better to drawing or playing games as a way of communicating.
- For older children, talking can include more complex issues and how they have affected the family.
- Talking can still be a useful exercise for children who have lost loved ones during the event. It is important, however, to be aware of the child's circumstances where possible to pre-empt and plan for emotional reactions.

## Set clear and firm limits/expectations of behaviour

Concentration difficulties, acting out and misbehaving are all common reactions to trauma, but are also common behaviours in children, generally. Therefore, it is important to explore the origins of problem behaviour before jumping to conclusions about diagnosis or implementing consequences or discipline strategies.

Educators should:

- set clear expectations of behaviour and communicate these to children
- maintain expectations relating to completing schoolwork and good behaviour. Rather than altering expectations, make adjustments (where necessary) to the delivery and/or format of classroom activities (e.g. change to 15- or 30-minute learning blocks and incorporate physical activity in between blocks to stimulate attention and concentration); and
- implement logical, fair and realistic consequences when expectations of behaviours are not met.

## Use a 'buddy' or 'support' system

If not already in place, educators can implement a cross-age buddy system whereby children are paired up to ensure that each has a dedicated support person while at school. A buddy system might be useful for various activities (e.g. transition, relaxation time, whole school activities) where children have easy access to someone to partner with at these times. Over time, buddy systems can be turned into more 'support' or 'companionship/friendship' systems, whereby children are encouraged to use their buddy as a source of emotional or academic support.



## Safe 'relaxation' spaces

All classrooms can benefit from having safe spaces that are specifically for children to use when they are experiencing difficulties. These areas can be used when children need some time to calm themselves down, or if the educator needs some time to talk to a child individually. Placing some comforting children's books or quiet activities in this 'relaxation' space will give children something else to focus on while they take some time out from the demands of the classroom.

## Provide choices – regain control

Often, during the traumatic event or the subsequent events that follow, children may feel a sense of powerlessness or loss of control. One strategy that might help children regain feelings of control is to provide

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them with choices or input into some activities. Examples of ways in which children can be offered choices or be involved in decision making include:

- providing suggestions regarding fun activities
- choosing between various classroom activities
- choosing between assignment topics; and
- helping to select and organise fundraising activities.

## Anticipate difficult times and plan ahead

Children may experience distress or the reoccurrence of symptoms at important milestones (e.g. anniversaries of the event, birthdays of lost family members, holiday times). Where possible, it is a good idea to plan ahead and pre-empt these occasions, providing support where appropriate.



## Prepare children for situations which may trigger reactions

Some children might still be affected by sudden and significant events or triggers. It can be useful for educators to warn or prepare children for any sudden events (e.g. fire drills, loud noises, turning off lights). For older children, it may be useful for educators to prepare students in advance regarding upcoming assignments or activities that relate to any aspects of the trauma experienced (e.g. discussion of natural disasters, science class which discusses concepts related to flooding). In these instances, some children might need to be given alternative activities they can partake in.

## Focus on strengths and positives

Acknowledging and reinforcing strengths, positive behaviours and coping strategies can be a particularly important and easy strategy for educators to practise and implement. This can be as simple as offering praise to students when you notice a positive behaviour or personal strength they have developed or demonstrated.

## Help children to build a support system

One of the most distressing outcomes following a natural disaster is the loss of community. It is important for children to build a strong support system after a natural disaster event. Educators can help young people to identify who they can talk to about difficult situations and any problems they are having (e.g. teacher, student welfare coordinator, other carer, youth worker, school counsellor, principal or nurse).

*This tip sheet was originally developed by the Centre of National Research on Disability and Rehabilitation Medicine, University of Queensland as part of the Queensland Government's response to the Queensland Natural Disasters. [Kenardy, De Young, Le Brocque & March. (2011) Brisbane: CONROD, University of Queensland]. The materials and content have been revised and extended for use as part of the Emerging Minds: National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health Community Trauma Toolkit.*

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