

Talking and listening: Helping children to cope with disasters

by Angela Owens

Several natural disasters and traumatic events have occurred in Australia and around the world during recent months. Events have included the New Zealand Pike River coal mining disaster in November 2010, devastating floods, bushfires, cyclones, earthquakes, tsunamis both in Australia and abroad, the crisis in the Middle East and the nuclear power plant emergency in Japan which was triggered by the earthquake in March 2011.

Many Australian children have been directly affected by the natural disasters that have occurred, some of whom will have lost family members, friends, pets, property and possessions. However, as well as those children who have suffered immediate loss and trauma, many children have also been exposed to the recent events via media such as television, radio and the internet, as well as through hearing the conversations of adults and older children.

The media coverage has often been at saturation point. It has frequently depicted disturbing images of the disasters as they have unfolded, their aftermath and footage of the people directly affected recounting their experiences. While some children may remain largely unaffected by what they have seen or heard in relation to a disaster, other children may experience signs of trauma. This is particularly likely for children who have experienced a disastrous event themselves, or children who have been exposed to a high level of media coverage of an event. Some children may also have been affected by media coverage due to the cumulative effect of the number of major disasters and their occurrence in a relatively short space of time.

How may children react to media coverage of disasters?

Many factors affect how children respond to disasters, including their level of development, their previous personal experiences, the extent to which they witness or hear about the event and what they see or hear.

Younger children often have difficulty understanding what they are hearing or seeing in relation to a disaster. For example, when a

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.1, 2.2, 3.1 and 3.4

OSHCQA Principles: 2.2, 4.2 and 5.3

QIAS Principles: 1.1 and 2.1

younger child sees images of a disastrous event repeated on the television they may think that it is happening over and over again rather than being one event.

Common signs that children under five years of age are having difficulty coping with what they have seen or heard include:

- Sleep problems
- Separation anxiety
- Difficulty concentrating
- Challenging behaviour
- Stomach aches and/or headaches
- Regression to previous behaviours
- Thumb sucking
- Becoming withdrawn
- General fearfulness
- Bedwetting.

Children aged five and over often understand the reality of what has happened and might worry that it could happen to them. Common signs that children in this age group are having difficulty coping with what they have seen or heard include:

- Worrying about the safety of family and friends
- Sleep disturbances and nightmares
- Decreased concentration levels and poor school performance
- Not wanting to go to school
- Changes in eating habits
- Stomach aches and/or headaches
- Withdrawal or hyperactivity
- Depression
- Aggression.

Not all children will exhibit all of these signs, and some children may react more strongly than

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others, depending on their age, personality, level of resilience and the extent to which they have been exposed to the trauma. Where educators are concerned that a child is suffering from an extreme reaction, or the reaction is prolonged, it is important that they speak with the child's family and support them to access specialist assistance from a mental health professional if they wish to do so.

What can educators do to help children to recover?

Children who are experiencing a negative reaction to what they have seen or heard about a critical event will be feeling some level of fear and insecurity. Educators play an important role in helping children to feel safe and secure, and in ensuring that the child care environment offers them stability and consistency.

Younger children will benefit from having many opportunities for one to one and small group times with educators, where interactions can be warm, friendly and individualised. Having a consistent, predictable routine, as well as opportunities to participate in positive play experiences of their choosing will also assist younger children regain their sense of security and to move on from the trauma.

Older children also need to feel a sense of stability and consistency in the child care setting when they are coping with seeing or hearing about traumatic events. However, older children also need to be given respectful and sensitive opportunities to talk about what they have seen or heard and their feelings about this. Conversations with children should be tailored to meet their individual level of understanding, and it is important for educators to talk with children's families to gauge how the events have affected their child outside of care. Enabling children to participate in expressive or creative activities such as art/craft, drawing, music and drama can support children to discuss their fears and anxieties. Reading relevant story books can

also help educators to begin conversations with children about the event/s that have occurred.

When discussing traumatic events with children it is essential that educators take children's fears seriously and that they acknowledge that these are genuine and significant to the child, even if the fear seems to be trivial or unwarranted. Using active listening skills and displaying empathy will help to alleviate children's anxiety, which will assist educators to talk with children to allay their fears about things that are unlikely to occur in reality.

Educators need to be conscious of their own reactions to traumatic events in front of children – being overly dramatic, crying or discussing their own fears or concerns in front of children will exacerbate any trauma that children may already be experiencing. Children will look to adults for guidance and cues, so it is essential that educators adopt a calm and reassuring approach to talking about disastrous events.

Conclusion

The natural disasters and tragic events of recent months have affected adults and children alike. While those directly impacted have experienced trauma and loss first hand, many of those who have witnessed these events via graphic and often constant media coverage have also been negatively affected. For children who are still building their resilience and their understanding of the world, the impact of these events can be very frightening and distressing. However, educators can play a key role in supporting children to cope with what they have seen and heard ■

This article relates to EYLF Learning:

- Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity
- Outcome 2: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

References and further reading

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