

Disasters affect children too

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Locals look on as the waters of the Hawkesbury River continue to rise completely covering the Yarramundi Bridge. *Photo: Getty Images*

Children can be badly affected, even from a distance, by natural disasters. Parents need to reassure them, Frances Stewart writes

CHILDREN experience significant trauma when natural disasters strike, with child psychologists warning even those not directly affected are likely to worry about loved ones, sense fear or tension from care-givers and be upset by disturbing images in media coverage - even if only viewed for essential safety information.

The Australian Psychological Society says "parents and care-givers should try to acknowledge any upset they may be experiencing while also reassuring their children that, as a family, they will be able to cope with the adversity caused by the floods or other disasters".

"Reactions can vary greatly.

"These reactions can include sleep disturbances, clinging to parents, change in appetite, aggressive behaviour, withdrawal, or other reactions.

"Thankfully, most children will subsequently experience healing and recovery after painful experiences and develop new strengths."

Parents and loved ones can play an important role in helping children cope by using age-appropriate strategies to reduce stress.

"Children under five are heavily influenced by their parents' reactions, while children from six to 11 are able to understand loss and permanent change and are prone to high levels of anxiety," the APS said. "Children over 12 have similar reactions to adults."

A pamphlet produced by Lifeline suggests talking to children about your own feelings and telling them it is normal to be upset.

"Allowing children to express their feelings without judgment is important, but they should not be forced to do so.

"Reassurance is the key, along with positive future plans."

Sticking to regular routines as much as possible also helps children reduce stress.

Macquarie University Children and Families Research Centre deputy director Dr Wayne Warburton said parents needed to take control of the television during natural disasters.

"Use the DVR to record helpful current affairs and news programs such as *Behind The News* on the ABC and try to avoid children having exposure to material inappropriate for them to deal with at their age," he said.

"If you are unsure what is appropriate, be conservative."

To prevent nightmares or insomnia, Warburton said children should stop playing games, watching TV, or listening to music for an hour before bed time.

"Help them use the time to engage in relaxed and positive activities that will encourage good sleep," he said.

"If children do see or hear frightening material, sit down and talk about it with them.

"Note the low likelihood of something frightening and similar happening to them, and explain why.

"Listen to what your child says to get a clear idea of what it is exactly that is upsetting them and then deal with that aspect directly.

"For young children, or where the child cannot really understand the nature of what has upset them, emphasise that you and other adults have control over their immediate environment, care for them, protect them and look out for them.

"In essence, let them know that the 'grown-ups' have things under control, and the child doesn't need to worry."

Helping those affected by natural disasters can also be important to helping children recover.

Donating a toy "not only deepens the child's understanding of what has happened, but empowers the child and restores a sense of agency and control".

■ Information on natural disasters and emergency management for kids can be found at www.ema.gov.au/schools. The 24-hour Lifeline Crisis Line is 13 11 14.

Read more: <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/national/disasters-affect-children-too-20120317-1vbzq.html#ixzz1rnPqh797>