

Children and Young People During Recovery

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Key information on development in disaster recovery

Recovery from a disaster

Following a disaster event people may experience trauma, loss and the effects of disruption to secure, familiar routines and life patterns within their family and school community for several years. This timeframe may not seem long for adults, but during this time children and young people are moving through developmental stages. Therefore, their development needs to be held in mind to protect them from harm during this critical stage.

Dimensions of development



Attachment to those who provide security for the child or young person



Routines and familiarity provide security, reduce complexity and predictability, and allow the child or young person to focus on themselves



Social life with peers provides a comparison with others and stimulates interaction for the child or young person



Physical environment with opportunities for self-expression, practicing what is familiar and allows the child or young person to explore new opportunities



Communication with peers and attachment figures helps to enable self-expression, problem solving, sharing experiences and gaining support



Sense of future with goals and opportunities gives the present a purposeful direction for the child or young person

These dimensions flow naturally under normal conditions, but after disasters adults need to keep them in mind for children and young people to prevent them from being disrupted or lost in the stress of life.

Impacts of disasters on development



Trauma from threat and danger



Loss of important people, animals and possessions



Disruption of patterns and routines of life

Trauma is caused by threat, danger and fear for self and others (whether the danger is real or imagined). Trauma disrupts development by causing fear, insecurity and avoidance of anything that triggers memories of the event. Processing trauma takes energy, and children and young people often prefer familiar activities over new activities.

Loss of people, animals, possessions and places undermine a child or young person's sense of security and confidence in the world. Grief is the way of adjusting and accepting the loss and is helped by expressing thoughts and feelings associated with this loss. Children and young people will process loss in their own way, and it may be months or years later before they begin the process.

Disruption of routine and familiar structures of daily life undermine a child or young person's sense of security and predictability. Activities that give enjoyment, confidence and comfort are easily lost in the stress of recovery.

Protecting development and safeguarding resilience during recovery

So much is new and distressing after disasters and the amount of work to be done seems overwhelming to adults and children alike. There can be a tendency to focus on the material losses and the work to replace them however, the intangible things that determine quality of life are the foundation of a meaningful and enjoyable existence after recovery. Adults can make sure children and young people are able to maintain joy, hope for the future and enthusiasm for life through structured and unstructured time with familiar groups and having fun through engagement in rewarding activities. Joy, intimacy, recreation, family, community and belonging, provide the energy needed to work through the recovery and maintain healthy development.

Considerations to protect the development of children and young people



Preserve teaching style but access and incorporate information about the child or young person's needs into your teaching to help them. This will support them to feel reassured by the familiarity of what you are doing. Be flexible and assume that any changes in their behaviour is being caused by what is happening in relation to the disaster. Children and young people often don't understand why they are feeling the way they do. Support them to work out the connections of how the impact of disaster can affect their thoughts, feelings and actions.



Promote open communication about the disaster and its effects. Talking about and listening to what has happened clarifies and helps children and young people to move forward. Communication through words or artistic methods may change how people feel and help them to reach a point of acceptance. The communication doesn't always need to be about the event itself, but about what it means to them and how it has changed them. Keep the communication lines open as children and young people will need to intermittently revisit the topic to consolidate their understanding of the changes.



Development is flexible. Stress and demands may push the development of some children and young people ahead as they take on responsibilities beyond their years. Others may pull back from external responsibilities and focus on managing their emotions and uncertainty. When things settle, it is necessary to ensure they are supported to release the responsibilities and return back to the expectations appropriate for their age.



Pausing development rebuilds energy to resume. Dealing with trauma and loss takes emotional energy, making it difficult to take on new developmental tasks for a period of time. Being flexible and slowing demands on children and young people will help to resume the challenges when they have restored their energy.



Regression is a natural response to stress. Retreating to behaviour from an earlier stage of development enables children and young people to go back to stages of emotional or social development where they felt comfortable, safe and in control. It frees energy to deal with trauma, loss and disruption. When energy is restored, they can enjoy the challenges of the next developmental stage again, and usually rapidly make up the lost time.



Allow the pace of development to be adjusted while children and young people work through their problems. Pausing or regression in their development shows they are struggling to keep everything together. Giving them flexibility and support by temporarily adjusting responsibilities or programs at school is often enough to allow children and young people to get back on track.