

Helping your children in a flood emergency

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Australia is an amazing place to live. Even in the biggest cities, you're never too far from the natural features that make life here so special. But sometimes the landscapes that make our communities so great can also challenge us.

This resource is about helping your children in a flood emergency. If your family is currently in an area that is experiencing and/or at risk of flooding, it outlines some steps you can take to help your children to prepare both practically and psychologically.

Check in on your emergency plans.

- The ABC has a short video on the [steps you can take to prepare your household for a flood](#).
- The Australian Red Cross has information on [how to develop an emergency plan](#).
- Check your local government flood plan to see what the risk of flooding is in your area, and what your council will do if there is a flood.
- Download your local State Emergency Service (SES) app or the [Bureau of Meteorology app](#) to monitor the potential impact of the floods in your area. These apps can keep you informed when you and your family are planning what actions to take.

Talk with your children about the possibility of floods and involve them in your emergency plans.

The following advice comes from Dr Briony Towers, an expert in working with children when planning for an emergency. Dr Towers has had children as young as six years old tell her they think about disasters and what they might do if one happened to them.



Involving children in emergency planning can have a protective effect. It gives children a sense of safety and security, and can help them to manage better during the flood and recover more easily. It is a way to make sure that your children's needs and priorities are included in your family's plan. Children also often see and think of things adults overlook. Even young children have creative, resourceful and valuable suggestions for preparing for an emergency.

Working together to create a family emergency plan involves talking about some of the potential scenarios that you may experience, and the steps that you will take together as a family.

Find out what your children already know

Your children may have already been exposed to media coverage or heard conversations about the floods. Finding out what they already know will help you to address their specific worries and concerns.

- What do your children already know and expect from floods?
- How would your family know if a flood was coming to your area?
- What do your children think would happen if a flood came?
- What do they think your family would do if a flood was coming? (It is helpful if you have already thought about this yourself so you can guide the conversation.)

Preparing for a flood

- Build your family's Plan A with your children (having a back-up Plan B is also really helpful).
- Include the practical tasks your children can help with, like filling sandbags, packing their 'go bags', helping you to explain the plan to their younger siblings, or looking after the pets.
- If your Plan A is to evacuate, talk through when you will leave, where you will go, what you will take and what you will all do before you leave.
- Pack a 'go bag' for each child. Include any essential items (clothing, formula, bottles, blankets) along with things they enjoy (books, games) and any objects or toys that mean a lot to them. Involve your children in the process so that their favourite items are included. Something that doesn't seem important to you could be very important to your child and children often grieve the loss of their favourite items following a disaster.
- Gather the things together that you might need to take quickly – for example, passports, money, credit cards, important contacts, medicines, photographs and your 'grab bags'.
- Check that your children understand what your plan is. Invite them to ask any questions they may have and problem-solve them together. Some common questions might be:
 - 'What are we going to do with our pets?'
 - 'What will happen if we need to evacuate at night when we are asleep?'
 - 'What if we need to evacuate and you are at work, or you need to help with the emergency efforts?'
 - 'What will happen to my things?'
- Practice your plan as a family. Stay calm and once you're done, talk about what worked well and what needs to change.
- Keep a copy of your plan somewhere everyone in the family can easily access it.
- Talk about situations where you might need to be separated from your children and who will take care of them. If you're likely to be separated for extended periods, you might like to use an app like ['While I'm Away'](#). It allows you to create a unique profile for each of your children, with the key information caregivers need to know to take care of each child. You could invite your children to help you pull together the information that others need to know about them.

- Discuss what your children can do if they get lost or are accidentally separated from you during a flood (for example, who is a safe person to go to for help). Think about the best ways to share information that will help them connect with you again (for example, your name, phone number, address). This is especially important if your children have trouble remembering those details, find it hard talking to new people, or have communication difficulties.

During a flood

If your home or community is impacted by flooding:

- Listen to your child's questions or concerns, while also looking out for and supporting their emotions and behaviours.
- Try to keep infants and children connected with familiar people, places or objects as much as you can. If they have been separated from loved ones, reunite them as soon as possible.
- Provide as safe an environment as you can for your family, both physically and emotionally.
- Keep each other in the loop about actions or changes you are making. This helps children to understand what is happening next and can reduce some of the fear and anxiety that comes with uncertainty.
- In the event of an evacuation, remember to grab your children's 'go bags' and other essential items. The Australian Red Cross has a helpful list of suggestions for [what to pack in an emergency](#).



After a flood

- Many infants and children will show some level of distress in the days and weeks following the flood. This might include increased worries, trouble sleeping, and changes in mood and concentration. This is expected – it is natural for many children (and adults too) to feel this way following a scary or stressful situation.
- Most children who experience the stress of a flood will gradually recover with time, reassurance and patience. However, despite all the care you can provide, your children may still need extra professional support. If your child is experiencing issues that last for more than a month or seem to be getting worse over time, or if they are making you feel distressed or concerned about your family's wellbeing, speak with your doctor (GP) or trusted health professional.
- Try to keep important routines or rituals going as much as possible (wherever you may be) – particularly the routines that involve connecting with your children, such as stories, play or watching your favourite shows/movies together.
- You are probably going through lots of emotions yourself – stress, anger, worry, exhaustion, relief, even guilt. Be gentle with yourself – but also try to be kind to your family. If you do lash out in a moment of stress (towards others or your children), take the time to help your children make sense of this and explain how you will try to manage your feelings in the future. You might say something like, 'I'm sorry I yelled at you. There are lots of things to think about and plan right now. But after a quiet moment and some deep breaths, I feel calmer.'



Managing the physical recovery

- Cleaning after a flood can be unpleasant and hard work. Smells and sounds can be challenging and may trigger feelings and worries from when the water flooded through. Reassure your children that you are working to repair your home (if that is the case) or find somewhere new to live. Where you can, involve them in helping to restore/ remake your home.
- Children are susceptible to catching gastroenteritis from flood waters, respiratory infections from mould and damp, and infections from cuts, mosquito bites and polluted water. Follow the World Health Organisation's advice on [how to protect your children from possible illness following a flood](#).

One of the best things you can do for your children right now is simply be there for them. Traumatic events can change how children view the world around them and make them feel like they are no longer safe. Your comfort, support and reassurance that you will get through this together are key to your children's recovery.

More information and support

If you or someone you know needs immediate help, please call 000.

The Raising Children Network has a list of [national and state-based parent support helplines and hotlines](#) you can call if you need support.

The [Emerging Minds Community Trauma Toolkit](#) has a range of information to support parents before, during and after a natural disaster, including the following resources:

- Video: [Children in the immediate aftermath of a disaster or traumatic event](#)
- Article: [How parents and caregivers can support children immediately after a disaster](#)
- Podcast: [Disaster preparedness with Dr Briony Towers](#)

The following booklets from the Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health list common physical and emotional responses to natural disasters, such as floods:

- [Recovering together after a natural disaster: Supporting families in pregnancy and early parenthood](#)
- [Recovering together after a natural disaster: Supporting families with babies and young children](#)

This resource was co-produced with:



This resource has been co-developed by Emerging Minds and the Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network at the Australian National University.

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