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Supporting children after natural and human-induced disasters

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This webinar is coproduced with Emerging Minds. They are working together as part of the National Workforce Centre for child Mental Health, which is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health under the National Support for Child and Youth mental health program.

Please note: The views expressed in this webinar are those of the presenters, and may not reflect those of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, or the Australian Government.



Housekeeping

- Send through your questions via the chat box at any time during the webinar.
- Let us know if you **don't** want your question published on the online forum following the presentation.
- All our webinars are recorded.
- The slides are available in the handout section of Gotowebinar.
- The audio and transcript will be posted on our website and YouTube channel in the coming week.

Supporting children after natural and human-induced disasters

**Emerging
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**National Workforce
Centre for Child
Mental Health**



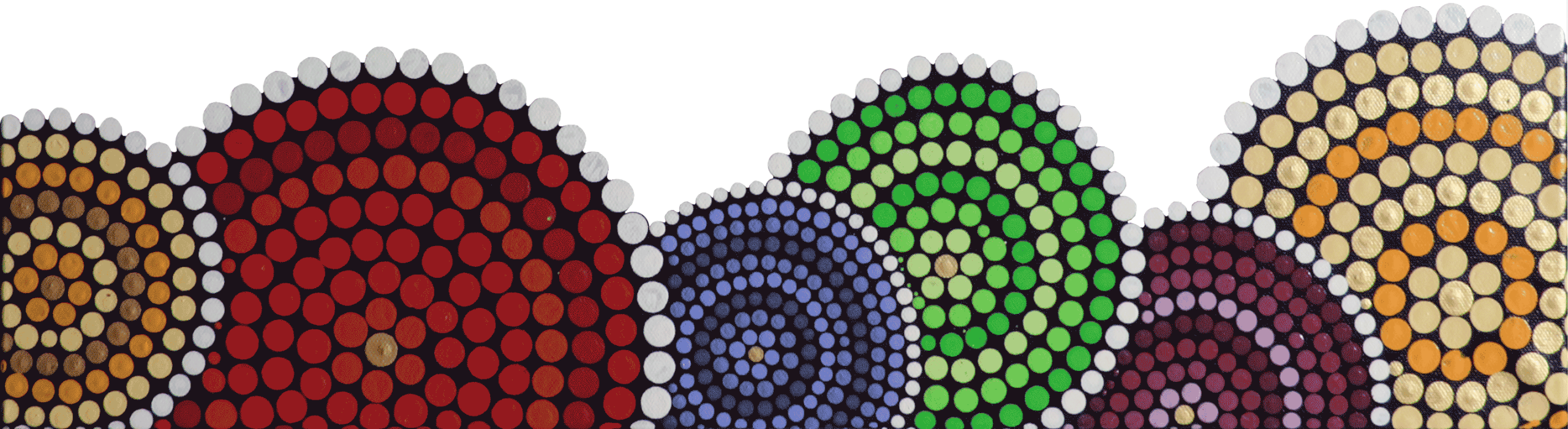
Learning Outcomes

This webinar will support practitioners to:

- prepare children and their families practically and psychologically for a disaster
- interact with children during an event in a way that may enhance their resilience and recovery
- support children and their families immediately after an event as they re-establish a sense of safety
- support children and their families in the ongoing recovery process
- understand the importance of self-care during and after a traumatic event
- identify emotional and behavioural difficulties in children that may indicate that ongoing, specialised support is required.

Emerging Minds and CFCA wishes to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands across Australia upon which our webinar presenters and participants are located.

We wish to pay respect to the Elders past, present and future for the memories, the traditions, the culture and hopes of Indigenous Australia.



Webinar series

2019/20 Emerging Minds series: *Focus on infant and child mental health.*

Future webinars:

- Responding to parents who are addicted to alcohol and other drugs. How can children's needs be considered through parent sensitive and non-shaming practice?
- Parent-child play: A mental health promotion strategy for all children
- Child-focused supervision. What does this mean and how does it work?
- Working with Aboriginal children and families in mainstream services
- Cultural considerations when working with children and families

Presenters

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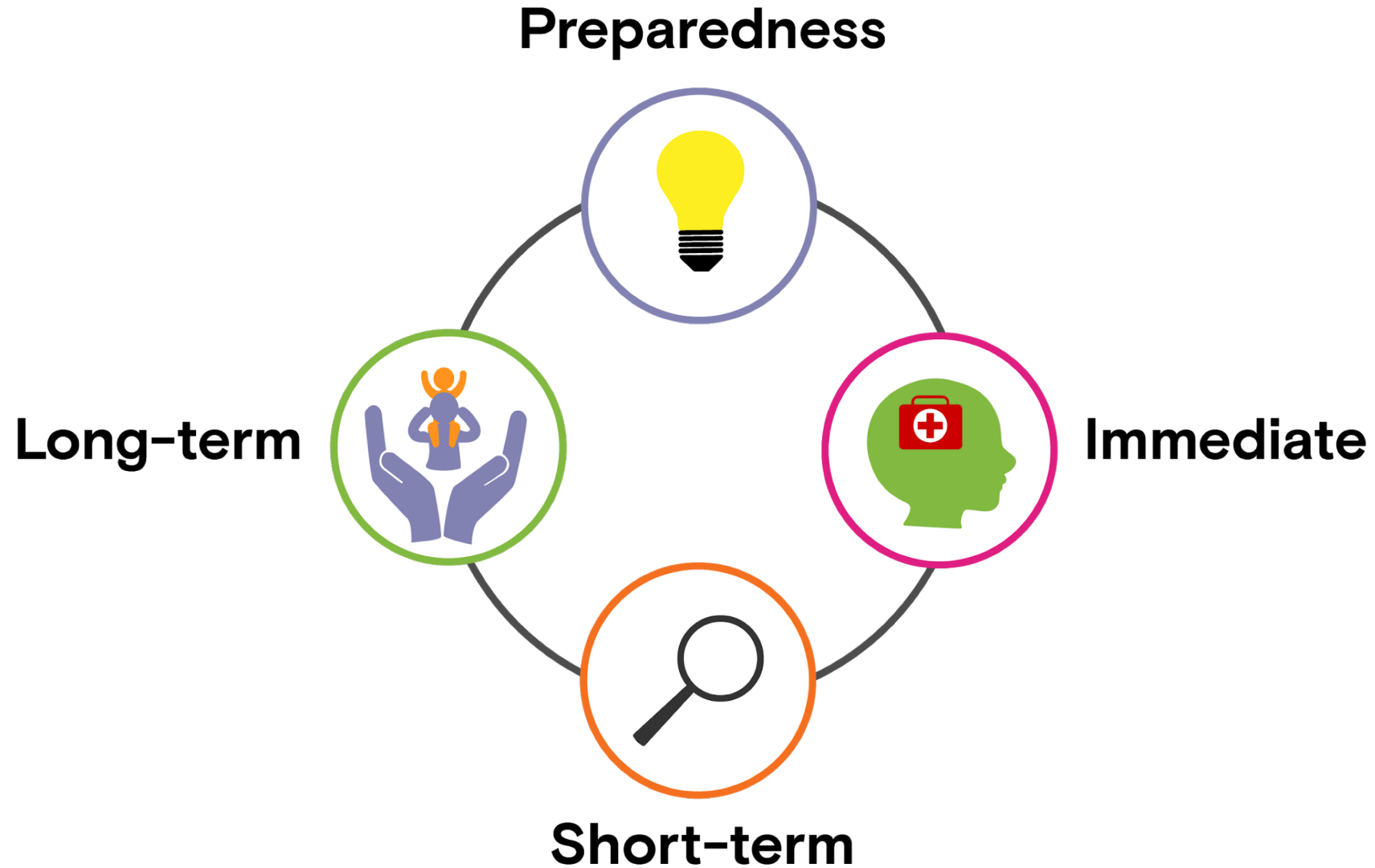


**Michelle
Roberts**
Psychologist



Chris Dolman
Senior Workforce
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Timelines of a natural disaster



Tips for HSSP self-care

Monitor your own reactions, emotions and needs

Seek help in trauma-related distress

Find your support system

Maintain a healthy lifestyle

Engage in stress reduction activities

Use positive coping strategies

- Breathing techniques, muscle relaxation, imagery
- Challenge unhelpful thoughts that cause distress
- Use helpful (but realistic!) thoughts and coping statements
- Look for self-help resources (e.g. websites, books)

Seek opportunities to reflect on your experiences with your professional colleagues.

Make time for yourself, family and friends

- Actively schedule, rather than wait for opportunities

Disaster preparedness: Supporting children before a natural disaster event



Encouraging parents to prepare early

- One of the most effective ways for parents and carers to minimise their children's stress and anxiety in a natural disaster event is to remain calm and cope well themselves.
- Engaging parents and carers about the importance of being prepared for disasters can increase their emotional and practical ability to manage disasters and traumatic events.
- In turn, this increases their confidence and ability to support their children during and after a natural disaster.
- HSSPs can help reduce stress by talking to each family member about what they need to do in a disaster, in the light of what they know about their particular strengths, needs and vulnerabilities.

Supporting families in disaster planning

Adopt a 'whole of family' approach to disaster preparedness planning

Talking to children about a disaster helps them to feel safer and more secure in the knowledge they have a family plan, are prepared and able to manage the threat. This provides sense of control to the child (and all family members).

Prepare early and revisit plans on a regular basis

Preparation can occur anytime prior to a disaster. Plan early and review the plan regularly.

Prepare parents and children both practically and psychologically.

Supporting children during and immediately after a natural disaster event



Introduction

- In the aftermath of a natural disaster, reactions will be at their most intense and children (and adults) will have different ways of dealing with the 'big' feelings they experience.
- Children will need the adults in their lives to help them when memories of the disaster, or 'big' feelings like sadness or anger, come up for them.
- Parents, however, may also be struggling with their own grief and loss and need external support to assist them in providing stability and routine for their children.
- HSSPs will be a critical resource for parents, families and children, providing support, guidance, reassurance and advice in the days, weeks, months and (in some cases) years after the crisis.

During and immediate aftermath

- The chances of children having ongoing difficulties are significantly reduced if they receive support, comfort and reassurance from the adults around them at the earliest possible stage post-disaster.
- Simply by remaining calm, acting in a controlled manner and displaying good coping skills, HSSPs will minimise stress and anxiety for any children they encounter and greatly assist them to feel safe and secure in the aftermath of a natural disaster.
- In addition, the application of some simple strategies, known as **Psychological First Aid (PFA)** can be key to reducing children's distress and assisting them to regain a sense of emotional and physical safety following a natural disaster event.

Psychological First Aid for Children



Supporting short and long-term disaster recovery



Age specific supports for assisting recovery

Children's reactions after a disaster will vary depending on several factors such as the child's age, development, temperament, their specific experience of the disaster and the significance of their losses, as well as their previous history of trauma and disruption.

The following information will assist HSSPs to inform their own practice – and provide parents and other significant caregivers (e.g. extended families, teachers, child care professionals) with age-appropriate advice and strategies to support resilience, coping and recovery in children after a natural disaster event.

Babies and younger children (0-24 months)

- Babies and toddlers can experience fear, but as their brains and bodies are still developing, they may not be able to make sense of what is happening.
- They will communicate their experience and feelings through their behaviours (e.g. crying or being clingy, withdrawn, angry or anxious) as well as verbal and/or non-verbal means (e.g. facial expressions, eye movements, drawings, play).
- After a natural disaster event, most babies and younger children who are well supported by nurturing and caring adults and predictable routines will overcome their distress and return to being themselves within weeks or months.

Strategies for babies and younger children

- Provide a consistent and predictable routine.
- Limit exposure to the media.
- Listen with your eyes and ears
 - Active listening, reflective listening and observational skills are all key.
- Monitor verbal expressions.
- Monitor non-verbal signals.
- Set expectations.
- Emphasise strengths.
- Be positive in communications and actions.
- Provide choice.
- Use relaxation techniques.
- Create safe 'relaxation' spaces.

Strategies for children 2–4 years and 5–12 years

- Monitor symptoms over time.
- Remain vigilant and curious about changes in behaviour or family circumstances.
- Familiarise yourself with ways to arrange help for the child.
- Maintain routines.
- Set clear and firm limits/expectations of behaviour.
- Explore origins of 'acting out' behaviour.
- Provide choice to assist in children regaining 'control'.

Strategies for children 2–4 years and 5–12 years (cont)

- Anticipate difficult times and plan ahead
 - Be aware, plan where possible and arrange support.
- Focus on strengths and positives
 - Reinforce positive coping strategies.
- Help children to build an extended support system.
- Talk about the event. But how?

Tips for talking to children about a natural disaster

- Place rules around disaster talk and amend the rules over time.
- Contain conversations that encourage fear
 - Focus on the threat being over; now is the time for recovery and rebuilding.
- Arrange extra support where necessary.
- Maintain professional role when sharing experiences.
- Model calmness.
- Focus on strengths, positive coping strategies and positive outcomes.
- Find alternative ways of 'talking' (e.g. drawing, play).
- For older children, conversation can include complex issues, such as relationships.

When should I seek additional help?

- Symptoms persist for longer than one month or worsen over time.
- Child shows a significant decline in performance.
- Problems interfere with daily functioning or cause significant distress.
- Child displays specific (ongoing or worsening) problems regulating emotions (e.g. difficulty controlling crying, anger).
- Child shows significant and lasting changes in social functioning.

When should I seek additional help? cont.

- Child regularly displays behaviours that disrupt others.
- Difficulties prevent the child from engaging in age-appropriate tasks.
- Child returns to behaviours typical of a younger child.
- Behaviour exists in multiple areas.
- Ongoing stressors outside of school.
- Child/family are experiencing significant distress or concern.

Supporting parents to support children

- A post-disaster environment may be disorganised and unpredictable. Parents may be unable to provide basic needs such as food and shelter.
- Parents are at increased risk of experiencing adverse psychological outcomes (anxiety, depression) and may develop ineffective parenting behaviours following a natural disaster.
- These changes in parenting style and the environment may have a negative impact on the parent-child relationship, further exacerbate behavioural and emotional difficulties or contribute to a child's belief that the world is a dangerous and unsafe place.

One of the key strategies for supporting children after a natural disaster event is to therefore ensure that parents are looking after their own personal wellbeing and seeking help and support for themselves as needed.

Supporting parents to support children cont.

- It is important for HSSPs to check-in with parents to:
 - assess how they are coping and encourage them to put strategies in place to look after their own needs and personal wellbeing
 - provide them with advice, information and guidance regarding the needs of their children and how best to support and reassure them
 - encourage the ongoing modelling of positive behaviours and coping strategies.
- Reassure parents that by looking after themselves they will be in the best position to support and proactively assist their children in their recovery.
- Introduce parents to self-care plans and pleasant events schedules.

Questions and discussion



Continue the conversation



Do you have any further questions?

Please submit questions or comments on the online forum following today's webinar:

aifs.gov.au/cfca/news-discussion