

# SCHOOLS SUPPORTING FAMILIES TO RECOVER FROM DISASTER

## SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS AND SCHOOL LEADERS

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Training for Affected Schools Project

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## Introduction

There are many ways that schools and families can work together in the aftermath of a disaster. Schools provide a natural focal point for communities with a significant portion of the community being connected through their child's attendance at the school.

## A whole of school approach

A 'whole of school' approach including all staff, parents and children (as is appropriate to their age and the impact of the disaster) will provide a consistent, coherent and psychologically safe environment for disaster-impacted families. It also has the potential to strengthen social connection of the families involved. A whole of school approach will facilitate the development of sensitive and effective policies and actions to assist families to recover from a disaster.

## Supporting families in the school context

These are some of the ways by which schools may be able to support families.

### Emotional support for families

Schools may be able to provide a welcoming place of familiarity, consistency and continuity for families.

Schools may be an environment that is a 'safe haven' for many, providing protection from the chaos, demands and reminders of the disaster. However, sometimes this is difficult where schools are stretched by their own challenges of recovery.

Schools can support parents by providing an environment where they feel supported and valued.

Schools can assist families by being sensitive to a range of feelings and needs when planning memorial activities.

Schools can support families by role modelling self care strategies and by making sure it is looking after its own staff members' emotional and physical wellbeing throughout the recovery.

### Practical support for families

Schools may be able to assist families to adapt to their new circumstances through practical strategies such as helping them with:

- homework clubs and study facilities
- after school care
- holiday programs
- school uniforms and books to replace those lost.

Schools may be able to support families by being mindful and understanding of the needs of parents and the demands on them such as:

- the practical issues of accommodation and daily living
- the complexities of navigating access to resources and assistance
- the repercussions of the disaster on parents emotional and physical wellbeing and how this can affect their ability to fulfil parenting roles.

Schools can assist families by being thoughtful and sensitive to school based situations which require separation of children and parents, particularly overnight school or holiday camps.

## AUSTRALIAN CHILD & ADOLESCENT TRAUMA, LOSS & GRIEF NETWORK

Schools can initiate and facilitate referral pathways when needed, in consultation with parents and through the provision of information about community resources and activities, medical and counselling services.

### Information support for families

Schools may be able to support families by facilitating the flow of information about the recovery process through various forums such as parent meetings, parent/teacher discussion, or printed material. Topics covered could include:

- normal reactions to the circumstances
- recovery processes and timelines
- how their children are progressing
- how parents can help their children.

Schools can be mindful of how they communicate with staff, students and parents, aiming for all communications to be clear and timely, and being prepared to provide both written and verbal forms of the same message (Culturally and Linguistically Diverse translations being made available where appropriate).

Schools can support families by actively facilitating the flow of information that is factual, relevant, accurate and easy to understand. It is important that the school avoids giving unassured hopes, 'promises' and platitudes that cannot be kept.

### Social connectedness for families

Schools can offer relationships that are trusted, supporting and nurturing for parents and children.

Schools may be able to support a child and their family for a long time – potentially years after the bushfires, and can help to provide guidance and understanding through the phases of recovery.

Schools can assist families by facilitating natural support systems between family groups.

Schools may be able to provide social events to help bring people together such as:

- family BBQs
- children's activities - football, concerts
- parent get-togethers.

Schools are places of teaching and learning and are part of the lives of children and families. *Schools provide and need support.* Coming together as members of the school community can provide positive opportunities for dealing with the challenges of the disaster and its consequences, and for shaping new ways forward.

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ACATLGN is a national collaboration to provide expertise, evidence-based resources and linkages to support children and their families through the trauma and grief associated with natural disasters and other adversities. It offers key resources to help school communities, families and others involved in the care of children and adolescents.