

# INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose – No. 1 parenting educator

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## Help your children make sense of natural disasters

As adults we all want our children to live carefree lives and keep them from the pain and even horror of tragedies such as natural disasters. In reality we can't do this.



The Queensland floods and the Victorian floods wreak incredible havoc on so many people's lives and will no doubt leave an indelible imprint on our collective psyches. These two natural disasters have been brought into our living rooms via the media over the last few weeks, and will continue to do so in the immediate future.

As adults we all want our children to live carefree lives and keep them from the pain and even horror of tragedies such as natural disasters. In reality we can't do this.

So what is a parent, teacher, or other caring adult to do when the natural disasters fill the airwaves and the consciousness of society? **Here are some ideas:**

**1. Reassure children that they are safe.** The consistency of the images can be frightening for young children who don't understand the notion of distance and have difficulty distinguishing between reality and fiction. Let them know that while this event is indeed happening it will not affect them directly.

**2. Be available.** Let kids know that it is okay to talk about the unpleasant events. Listen to what they think and feel. By listening, you can find out if they have misunderstandings, and you can learn more about the support that they need. You do not need to explain more than they are ready to hear, but be willing to answer their questions.

**3. Help children process what they see and hear, particularly through television.** Children are good observers but can be poor interpreters of events that are out of their level of understanding.

**4. Support children's concerns for others.** They may have genuine concerns for the suffering that will occur and they may need an outlet for those concerns. It is heartwarming to see this empathy in children for the concerns of others.

**5. Let them explore feelings beyond fear.** Many children may feel sad or even angry with these events so let them express the full range of emotions. They may feel sadder for the loss of wildlife, than for loss of human life, which is impersonal for them.

**6. Help children and young people find a legitimate course of action if they wish.** Action is a great antidote to stress and anxiety so finding simple ways to help, including donating some pocket money can assist kids to cope and teaches them to contribute.

**7. Avoid keeping the television on all the time.** The visual nature of the media means that images are repeated over and over, which can be both distressing to some and desensitizing to others.

**8. Be aware of your own actions.** Children will take their cues from you and if they see you focusing on it in an unhealthy way then they will focus on it too. Let them know that it is happening but it should not dominate their lives.

**9. Take action yourself.** Children who know their parents, teachers, or other significant caregivers are working to make a difference feel hope. They feel safer and more positive about the future. So do something. It will make you feel more hopeful, too. And hope is one of the most valuable gifts we can give children and ourselves.

Children's worlds can be affected in ways that we can't even conceive of so adults need to be both sensitive to children's needs and mindful of what they say and how they act in front of children.

In difficult times, it is worth remembering what adults and children need most are each other.

Michael Grose Presentations  
PO Box 167 Balnarring Vic 3926  
p + 61 3 5983 1798  
f (03) 5983 1722  
e office@parentingideas.com.au

parentingideas.com.au  
 parentingideas.co.uk  
 parentingideas.co.nz  
 facebook.com/michaelgroseparenting  
 twitter.com/michaelgrose



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