

Supporting young people when disasters just keep coming

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How can adults support children and young people during challenging

times? Deakin mental health researchers have some suggestions.

Many Australians have been under intense emotional pressure since late 2019. The unprecedented events feel relentless: extreme weather, the COVID-19 pandemic and its strict lockdowns and border closures, and the unfolding impacts of war in Ukraine.

And with a 24-hour news cycle of constant updates and images of disasters, the world can feel overwhelming, even for adults.

How do we even begin to think about supporting our children and young people through these times?

"The best investment in our kids is to make sure we're look after ourselves as parents," says child clinical psychologist Dr. Elizabeth Westrupp, whose research investigates [child development](#) in the [family environment](#) at Deakin University's Centre for Social and Early Emotional Development (SEED).

"If parents are feeling anxious and upset, then children are going to notice. And that in itself can be worrying for kids.

"As parents, it's so important to make sure we are sleeping and eating properly, staying active and taking breaks. And it's okay to take time out from our kids," Dr. Westrupp says.

"Even when terrible things are happening in the world, it's okay to take time to catch up with friends and have some fun. That actually helps us to be better parents."

Once you're sure you can handle conversations about stressful current events with calm confidence, how do you decide which topics are appropriate for children and young people?

"There's almost no topic, including death, that you can't raise with a child," says Dr. Westrupp. "If a child is asking, then you should talk to them about it."

With [younger children](#), you can start and guide those conversations. How you approach them depends on the individual child. Consider their age, level of maturity, what information they may already have, and how they are likely to react to new information.

"In early developmental stages, kids often have big imaginations," Dr. Westrupp says.

"For those children who are especially prone to worry or nightmares, they need to know that they are safe, especially when discussing distressing world events, like the war in Ukraine.

"That doesn't mean that you can't have the conversation. It just means that you might be a bit more planned about how you do it."

For teenagers, Dr. Westrupp recommends parents take a more passive role. Respecting an adolescent's independence is important and parents should focus on creating a safe place for them to express their thoughts and emotions while being available for support.

Parents should also understand that the access older children and adolescents have to information sources outside the family creates a valuable learning opportunity for young people.

"I think a lot of us are quite afraid about what media our children are engaging in," says Dr. Westrupp.

"Knowing how to evaluate the sources and quality of information is a critical life skill in the modern world. If we can teach children the skills

to be really thoughtful and critical users of media, then it reduces the risks of them being targets for misinformation."

Professor Craig Olsson, Director of SEED, says Australia must also take a long-term view to equipping young people to deal with future adversities. We can do this by strengthening the foundations of emotional development from childhood through to adolescence.

"A key foundation is care for the physical body through the restorative power of good sleep, good nutrition, and regular physical activity. If our bodies aren't well, our minds can't be either. Good physical regulation supports our ability to manage our emotions.

"Access to strong and supporting relationships is critical as well. This is because most of our ability to regulate strong emotion mostly happens within the context of close relationships with others, starting with parents in childhood and then extending to peers and partners in adolescence.

"When physical needs are met, and close relationships are strong, the foundations for greater self-regulation of emotion begin to emerge. This includes skills to solve things that can be changed, accept things that can't be changed, and skills to distinguish between the two," says Prof. Olsson.

"But by far the most important foundation to nurture is the capacity to find meaning beyond self-interest. Our ability to care for others and the world reflects a sense of hope that is as critical to [emotional health](#) as air is to life itself."

So how do we strengthen these foundations in our kids? Prof. Olsson says investing in and enriching the social environments in which children and young people live and grow—family, school and community—is key to supporting healthy social and emotional development.

"When the right public health investments are made, with the right health services investment too (for those needing more focused support), the developmental foundations come together. Then you have children and young people who have an incredibly powerful advantage: they can adapt, they can absorb a challenge, they can process it, and they can evolve themselves in relation to it and move on," says Prof. Olsson.

"And this not only prepares [young people](#) for future challenges, whatever they may be, it also positions them to make the world a better place as a result."

Provided by Deakin University

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