Approaching bad weather: Helping children feel prepared rather than scared

Extreme weather events can be frightening and distressing for children. In many places, the season for extreme weather is quite predictable. One of the most important jobs for parents heading into this season is to help their children feel prepared rather than scared by the prospect of extreme weather. A crucial part of feeling prepared is the development of emotional resilience. Emotional resilience relating to bad weather involves parents helping children recognise, accept and appropriately express their feelings about weather. This tip sheet provides some suggestions on how to promote children’s emotional resilience going into the bad weather season. Parents can build resilience by having a family plan to help children feel prepared and by helping children develop a realistic outlook. Parents can promote resilience by maintaining daily routines as much as possible, by being safety conscious without being over-protective, and by modelling being calm and in control. Being too protective or over-protective without real evidence of danger can make children believe the world is a dangerous place.

Approaching bad weather

The prospect of approaching a bad weather season can be scary for some children and indeed some parents. Children may become upset by events that signal the start of the storm/fire/cyclone season, especially if they have experienced distressing weather events in the past. Depending on the specific weather events relevant to your community, here are some common triggers that may provoke distress:
- Storm clouds.
- The smell and/or sight of fire.
- Weather reports of expected storms or bad weather.
- Heavy rains and strong winds.
- Images on the TV of other disasters both local and overseas.
- Anniversaries of previous dangerous weather events (with the accompanying media attention).
- If relevant, birthdays and anniversaries of the deaths of loved ones.

What is emotional resilience and why is it important?

Emotional resilience refers to the ability to manage unpleasant feelings such as fear and sadness and to cope with stressful situations. Emotional resilience is important in the lead up to a bad weather season as it is common for children to become frightened or distressed by the prospect of extreme weather. Children are at increased risk of feeling fearful or distressed if the previous bad weather season involved dangerous situations (e.g. fire, flood, cyclone, hurricane) that claimed lives and/or caused significant property damage. Children have different temperaments and some are more sensitive than others. However, it is important for all children to gradually develop skills to manage emotions. Emotional resilience in the context of a bad weather season has important benefits for children. Emotionally resilient children are more likely to:
- Manage emotions and move through negative feelings to feel better again.
- Cope with reminders of bad weather (e.g. rain or wind).
- Engage in practical tasks, like following a safety plan, unhindered by fear and anxiety.

They are also less likely to resort to unhelpful ways of coping, such as misbehaving, avoiding going outside when there are clouds in the sky or relying on others to resolve their distress or give them sympathy.

Building blocks

The building blocks for parents to help their children become emotionally resilient in the lead up to the extreme weather season involve:
- Hold a family meeting.
- Maintaining family routines.
- Managing your own emotions.
- Helping children recognise, accept and talk about their feelings.
- Helping children develop a realistic outlook.

Hold a family meeting to help children prepare

At the beginning of the bad weather season hold a family meeting to discuss how your family is going to handle the coming season. Here are some tips to make the family meeting work well.

All family members should attend

So that children feel part of the process of being prepared to confront a stressful situation everyone in the household should attend and should have their say. Keep the meeting short (maximum 15 minutes).

Explain the reason for holding the meeting and what will be discussed

Dad and I have called this family meeting so we can discuss a family plan to prepare for the upcoming storm/cyclone/fire season. We need to talk about our plan for what we would do if there was a flood/storm/cyclone/fire near us. OK? This will take about 10 minutes.
▼ Ask Children to Share Their Experiences and Concerns

If relevant, ask children what they remembered about the last significant weather event and how they coped. Encourage them to talk about their feelings and concerns about the coming season. Encourage them to reflect on what they did well (e.g., I followed Mum and Dad’s instructions). Use the guidelines below to help children express their feelings (see section on Helping children recognise, accept and appropriately express feelings).

▼ Introduce Your Family Plan

Discuss your family plan so that children know what to expect.
- Your parents will look after you. Reassure children that it is Dad and Mum’s job to keep you safe and to make sure nothing happens to you.
- Put the list of emergency telephone numbers for doctor, fire, ambulance, and police somewhere prominent in the house (e.g., on the fridge) and make sure everyone knows where it is.
- Let children know that you have an emergency first aid kit and where it is kept.
- Let children know that you have an emergency supply of food and water should you need it.
- Let children know that in an emergency, to keep them safe, you expect and need them to do as they are told.

▼ Summarise the Key Points to Remember

State the key take out messages from the discussion. Ask your children one at a time to repeat the main messages. So what are the main things you need to remember?

▼ End on a Positive Note

Convey a positive optimistic message that you are confident in each family member’s ability to be part of the team and your belief that as a family you will all get through the bad weather season by helping each other and working together.

MAINTAIN FAMILY ROUTINES AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE

Children are better able to cope with stressful events such as bad weather when everyday family routines (e.g., mealtimes, bedtimes, reading stories) are maintained as much as possible. If bad weather temporarily disrupts routines reintroduce them as soon as possible. These routines create certainty and predictability and convey to children that you as the adult are looking after their wellbeing.

MANAGE YOUR OWN EMOTIONS

Children cope with stressful events better if those around them are also coping well. Through your own actions model being brave, calm and in control so children can see that potentially distressing events can be dealt with.

Sometime parents who are anxious or worried become too protective or over protective — for example by frequently asking or checking whether the child is alright (Are you sure you are all right? You look really worried to me.). Acting this way without evidence of danger or upset makes children believe there is something they should be worried about — that the world is a dangerous place.

HELPING CHILDREN RECOGNISE, ACCEPT AND APPROPRIATELY EXPRESS FEELINGS

From infancy, children experience different emotional states (e.g., contentment, pleasure, discomfort and distress). As children move through their preschool and primary school years they become better able to recognise, talk about and understand how they feel and how others may feel. This involves being aware of a feeling (e.g., anxiety) and having the words to describe it (e.g., afraid). Their feelings may also become more complex as they grow up. There are many things parents can do to help children learn to recognise, understand and accept different feelings.

▼ Accept Different Emotions

It is important to accept that it is normal and healthy to feel ups and downs. Let your child know that it is okay to be afraid of bad weather, especially in environments that experience occasional extreme weather. Protecting them from this type of upset is not possible.

▼ Allow Children to Talk About Their Feelings

Talk to your child about their emotions regarding extreme weather events. Do so before it happens. Opportunities to talk may come if your child mentions the prospect of storms or in response to watching or listening to weather reports on television or radio.

▼ Share Your Own Feelings (within limits)

Children learn a lot about emotions by watching their parents’ faces and gestures. Faces provide clues about how someone is feeling. If young children see expressive faces, they learn what they mean; for example, that smiling and laughing are related to happy feelings.

Share your feelings and stories about bad weather. Explain the reasons you felt this way and talk about what you did to deal with any negative feelings. Personal stories that convey courage in the face of fear and overcoming a challenge convey to children that being anxious is something that can be dealt with. It also conveys that you as a parent are strong, prepared and in control.

▼ Help Your Child Recognise Emotions

When children appear distressed, it is important to help them recognise and label the emotion. For instance, the parent of a child who repeatedly checks the sky in an anxious fashion might say, I wonder if those clouds are worrying you. How are you feeling? This kind of labelling will help children be able to talk more confidently about their feelings.

If your child seems concerned about extreme weather, read together stories or information about bad weather and encourage your child to express their emotions.

▼ Expressing Feelings Appropriately

Once the child is helped to express emotions about the approaching bad weather season they also need to learn when and where this is appropriate.

It is important for children to learn that being anxious and fearful can upset other children. Talking about fears relating to bad weather is appropriate with parents, other relatives and teachers, but less so to children of a similar age. Further, there are socially inappropriate ways of expressing feelings, such as losing control and yelling, or showing anxiety through hurtful actions like hitting others.

Acceptable ways of expressing emotions are related to cultural and family expectations. Here are some tips for encouraging children to express their feelings appropriately.

▼ Help Your Child Talk About Feelings

Parents can help children feel comfortable to talk about their feelings about bad weather:
- Ask your child how they feel about a news story or recent bad weather.
- Summarise what your child shares with you It sounds like you feel very frightened when you see smoke in the distance or You felt really angry when you thought a storm was coming?
- Avoid telling your child how they should feel, such as saying there is nothing to worry about. Instead, try to acknowledge their feelings.
- Talk about how you feel. Or use stories and illustrations to talk about how characters in a book or movie feel.
- Help your child recognise feelings in others. Ask how they think another child or adult might feel.

▼ Deal With Inappropriate Expression of Feelings

Children can be so frightened about bad weather, or the thought of going to
school during the bad weather season, that their feelings turn into angry, hurtful or disrespectful behaviour. Parents need to decide how to deal with this.

Through consistent consequences, children can learn about acceptable ways of expressing their feelings. Here are some suggestions:

- Acknowledge the upset before dealing with the problem behaviour. I can see you are very worried about the report of high fire danger today.
- Tell your child what to stop doing, briefly say why, and tell your child what to do instead. Stop yelling at me; it is not nice to yell at people. Calm yourself down... Sit down and take a deep breath.
- A logical consequence, quiet time or time-out may be a suitable back-up consequence if problem behaviour continues.

Parents can also model better ways of expressing upset feelings. When you are annoyed or upset about something, avoid yelling. Show your child how to keep calm and deal with the situation assertively by stating what you would like to happen instead.

**BUILDING A REALISTIC OUTLOOK**

Children’s feelings are related to what they think about and tell themselves, and the experiences they have. For example, thinking the worst will happen. Parents can help children develop realistic ways of thinking about extreme weather events and their ability to cope with these.

Realistic thinking is a key life skill. It involves the ability to figure out whether, given the available information, a feared event (e.g., a life-threatening fire) is actually worth worrying about (i.e., is likely to happen) or not (i.e., is unlikely to happen). It also involves feeling prepared should the event actually occur. The final part of a realistic outlook is accepting that there are things that cannot be either changed or controlled. Since an individual person (regardless of whether they are an adult or child) can not control whether or not a cyclone or hurricane occurs, this element of developing a realistic outlook is particularly important in the lead up to an extreme weather season.

**Encourage Realistic Thinking**

The way people think about themselves, the world and other people varies greatly. Some people are extremely optimistic or positive thinkers — assuming that things will work out and that feared events will not eventuate. Other people are extremely pessimistic or negative thinkers — assuming that their worst fears will come true and that generally, things will go badly. When it comes to extreme weather, it is essential for parents to encourage children to be realistic thinkers.

Dangerous weather events do occur and can threaten safety. Therefore, it is important to be sensible during the extreme weather season and take precautions. On the other hand, it is not helpful for a child to stay inside their home for the whole cyclone season just in case there is a cyclone.

Here are some suggestions for encouraging realistic thinking when children are having fearful or distressing thoughts about extreme weather:

- Model being realistic rather than either overly optimistic or pessimistic. If children hear lots of realistic comments, they will begin to think this way themselves.
- Ask your child to think about the past few days and whether there has been any indication of dangerous weather.
- Ask your child to think about now and whether there has been any indication of dangerous weather.
- Ask your child to reflect on how you as the parents are acting — it is the job of parents to keep children safe from dangerous weather that is predictable.
- Remind your child that, for most types of dangerous weather, there are warnings beforehand that allow people enough time to get to safety.
- Monitor your child’s exposure to media coverage of extreme weather. Media reports and images can be extremely frightening. If your child is watching this kind of coverage, sit with them as they watch and help them to understand what is being reported — how much is fact? is the danger near or far away? what it means for your family?

**Help Your Child Be Prepared**

A crucial ingredient in being a realistic thinker is knowing that dangerous weather events do occur, and that should you experience one, your family will be as prepared as it is possible to be. The most important thing for parents to do in relation to encouraging preparedness is to develop a family plan for the extreme weather most commonly experienced by your community (e.g., fires, cyclones, floods or hurricanes). It is useful to give children developmentally appropriate tasks within this plan. Involve children in putting together an emergency kit (e.g., battery operated radio, batteries, torch, candles, matches). In the lead up to the extreme weather season, children can be involved in helping with jobs that reduce the risk of threat if this is developmentally appropriate or parents can tell their children about the jobs that have been done around the house (e.g., cleaning leaves out of gutters in bushfire season).

In the event of a dangerous weather warning (e.g., a severe storm warning), children can help to move objects — such as their bicycles — indoors. Ensuring that children know that there is a family plan in the event of dangerous weather, and that all reasonable precautions have been taken encourages a sense of preparedness and helps contain children’s anxiety.

**Encourage Acceptance**

Children often have an unrealistic view of their own role in making things occur (e.g., they may think something that was clearly outside of their control was their fault; or they may think If only I hadn’t done… then that wouldn’t have happened). Extreme weather events are examples of stressful life events that are entirely outside children’s control. It is important that children understand this. Children need to know that parents are in charge, that parents have taken sensible precautions and have a plan.

**Answering Children’s Questions**

Children’s fears and worries about extreme weather and potentially dangerous weather events are often expressed through the questions they ask. Will our house be safe? Will that fire get to us?

These questions can be hard for parents to answer. Here are some general guidelines for how to respond to children’s questions:

- Answer truthfully. It is generally better to be direct and honest even if the answer is painful.
- Give your child your full attention and listen carefully to what the child is asking about.
- Avoid providing too much information.
- If you do not know the answer offer to find out. Use the internet, talk to friends or neighbours who may know the answer. If your child has lost interest in the answer in the meantime, don’t press the information on them.
- Clarify the child’s thoughts about the answer to their question. Sometimes their imaginings are more frightening than the reality. Have peers, or an unreliable source told them other information that is frightening?

Here are some ideas to incorporate in your answers. You will need to use your knowledge of your children (their personalities as well as their stage of development) and your own family beliefs to make your answers fit with your children.

Question: Is it going to flood again?
Key points:
- Think about the past few days. There has been no danger.
- Think about now. There is no current threat.
- Think about how Mum and Dad are acting. We’re not frightened and it’s our job to look after you.
- We get warnings about dangerous weather and there are no warnings.
- We have a family plan.

PARENTING AND PARENT TRAPS

There are a number of traps parents can fall into that accidentally encourage children’s emotional distress. One of the interesting things about parenting traps is that they are often simply too much of something that can be helpful. For example, feeling protective of our children when they are distressed is a normal and common reaction for many parents. However, it is not always helpful. Like many aspects of parenting, there is a balance to be struck here.

Children learn a great deal about safety and danger in their world from parents. Here are some traps to watch out for in building resilience in children heading into the bad weather season:

- Encouraging children to talk too much about their fears and worries. Too much attention to children’s fears and distress can be unhelpful and will encourage them to dwell on these feelings.
- Discouraging children from expressing their fears and distress. This may give the message that it is not ‘normal’ to feel afraid at the prospect of extreme weather.
- Being very protective of children simply because they are expressing fear or distress. As discussed, children need to be helped to express these emotions appropriately with a view to resolving these emotions — not as a means of spending extra time with a parent or of avoiding a feared situation (e.g. attending a soccer game on a windy, overcast day).
- Taking over and feeling that you need to ease their feelings completely.

Talking at length to children about your own fears and worries. As discussed, it is important to model appropriate expression of emotion, but when children are already fearful, this needs to have careful limits set around it. Don’t introduce new things for children to worry about.

Children need to know that their parents are coping; otherwise they find it hard to feel safe. Children need to learn from their parents that, while dangerous weather events can happen in the world, the world is not always a dangerous place.

HELPING CHILDREN DEAL WITH NEGATIVE FEELINGS

Negative emotions are part of everyday experiences. They are common during the bad weather season but they do not need to become extreme if children learn to manage these feelings. Common weather related negative emotions include anger, anxiety, distress, and sadness.

It is not possible to completely protect children from these feelings. In fact, many emotions are short-lived and pass quickly without parents needing to do anything. When children are distressed or worried about bad weather, parents can calmly assist. Parents can also work on helping children learn to resolve negative feelings without needing an adult to intervene.

Help Your Child Manage Negative Emotions

Here are some steps parents can take to help a child when they are distressed:

- Recognise when your child is upset.
- Stop what you are doing and pay attention.
- Ask your child what is wrong and encourage them to tell you what they are feeling.
- Listen to what your child has to say.
- Acknowledge their feelings — name the emotion and let your child know it is okay to feel upset.
- Ask how they would like to deal with the situation and if they would like you to do anything to help.
- Convey your confidence in your child’s ability to manage their distress. Remind them of a time when they showed strength or determination to overcome an obstacle.
- Stay calm and avoid getting angry or upset yourself.
- Talk about the incident later, when your child has settled down.

KEY STEPS

- Children may feel fearful or distressed during the extreme weather season.
- Coping with emotions is important for happiness, wellbeing and success in life.
- Hold a family meeting to help children prepare.
- Maintain family routines.
- Help your child recognise, understand and accept feelings.
- Encourage your child to express feelings in appropriate ways.
- Help your child develop a realistic outlook.
- Monitor your child’s exposure to media reports.
- Make sure that your children know that the family has a plan for dangerous weather.
- Help your child learn to deal with negative feelings.

FOR FURTHER HELP See the Positive Parenting booklet for more information on positive parenting strategies. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child’s progress, contact the service where you were given this tip sheet.

Triple P is a parenting program developed by Professor Matthew R. Sanders and colleagues in the Parenting and Family Support Centre, School of Psychology at The University of Queensland with funding support from Queensland Health, Victorian Department of Human Services, Health Department of Western Australia, and National Health and Medical Research Council.

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