

Emerging Minds

National
Workforce
Centre for Child
Mental Health

How can I support children during a drought?

The hardship of drought can wear on even the toughest individuals. It is a whole-family and whole-community issue, but everyone experiences it uniquely, and can have different reactions to the same event.

Children of all ages can be affected by stress and adversity. It is not just stress of a particular event which affects children, but the flow-on effects and changes in day-to-day life due to ongoing stressful circumstances, such as drought, that can create uncertainty and concern for them.

Children understand their world through their relationships with their family, friends, and community. How long-term stress or hardship affects them will be influenced by their personality, how their family deals with stress, and how the community copes around them. Children are also naturally resilient, and tend to cope with hardship quite well, as long as there are supportive adults around to help them when they need it.



What can I do to help the kids I know?

- Look after yourself so you can better look after others.

Research shows that adult and parents' wellbeing and ability to cope are strongly linked to how well children recover during and after traumatic or stressful events. Your behaviour and moods impact children in terms of their stress levels, and their relationship with you. It is important you seek out any help you or your children may need, including from family, friends, community or from other sources such as online support in order to support your children.

Kids learn about stress from watching adults. You will teach children around you how to deal with stress and hardship because children look for adult guidance on how to manage feelings. If you have a bad day or get angry, rather than beating yourself up, speak to your children afterwards about what happened, that you are feeling stressed but you are OK. This will help reassure them that it's not their fault and help them make sense of what is going on.

- Try looking at the drought through your children's eyes.

If possible, try to imagine the drought from your child's point of view. This may help you to understand some of their reactions and behaviours. It may also assist connecting and supporting them.

Children are shaped by their interactions with family, friends, and community. Their ability to navigate tough times is directly impacted by the reactions of trusted family members and the support of their community. Children's reactions and behaviours can also make more sense when we imagine what they might be experiencing. Asking children directly how they feel or what they may be worried about supports them to

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feel heard and supported, and doesn't leave them on to manage their feelings alone.

Some children will be affected more than others. Children are more likely to need additional support if they have existing vulnerabilities or difficulties at home or school before the drought started; if they have recently experienced big changes or challenges like a new school or moving house; if they have a physical, mental, or developmental disability; or if parents and other adults who care for them are having difficulty with their own mental health and wellbeing.

Keep an open conversation with your children.

Make sure that children know it is ok to talk about what is bothering them. As adults, we often assume that children just 'know' they can come to us to talk about things. But children or adolescents may feel that they don't want to upset their parents, or that adults won't understand what being a kid is like. Make sure you ask children how they are feeling and give them space to answer without judging their feelings. You may also need to ask them several times over a period of weeks or months before they are ready to talk. Reassuring them that you are there and won't get upset with what they say will help with the process.

Help children identify, describe, and express their feelings. It can be hard for children to know the words to describe all of their feelings. You can help by giving some open suggestions and putting yourself in the conversation e.g "When I was your age and we had a few tough years on the farm and I often felt worried and scared. Do you ever feel like that?"

Support children's feelings, no matter what they are. Telling a child "you shouldn't be feeling that way" or "you need to get over this and be strong" doesn't stop them from feeling what they are feeling. It often just makes them wary of sharing things with you, and can stop them from expressing their emotions altogether. Even when your child's emotions and responses seem excessive or difficult, often they are just looking for reassurance, love, and affection from their loved ones. You can give this by reassuring them it's ok to feel however they feel, and that you are there to help. Even if they push you away, they still need to be told.

Be on the look out for changes in your child's mood or behaviour

At times of stress, children can respond in different ways. They can withdraw, stop paying attention, cry or throw tantrums, or find it hard to learn at school. They may act out, be anxious, be angry at small things, or be more tense than usual. They can also start showing behaviours typical of a much younger or older child. While most have a natural resilience, a minority of children will find the impacts of drought more difficult to deal with. If you are concerned about your child, it may be helpful to link them in with additional support.

It is helpful for children to have boundaries maintained gently but firmly, especially in time of stress. Sometimes children act out when they are feeling unsure, unseen or lonely, and need care and attention. For example, you can express that it is fine to be angry about how the drought has affected your life, but it is not OK to trash your room. Although keeping boundaries, and your cool, may be difficult when you are also under stress, maintaining these boundaries will assist in providing a sense of safety for children.



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Support children's social connections and hobbies.

Children need time with friends and family, and they also need time pursuing their favourite hobbies. Most of all, they need time to be kids.

Some of the toughest effects of drought are the feelings of isolation, of not wanting to burden others who are also experiencing hardship, and the reduction in community events and spirit. For this reason, children and parents need friends and family time more than ever.



Give children the opportunity to make choices and decisions for themselves.

Drought is notable for the feeling of powerlessness it can create in people. Giving choice, even in small matters, can help counter these feelings which can easily topple into feelings of helplessness. Involving children in decision making encourages their strengths, and highlights what they are good at.

It gives you an opportunity to praise them on their successes and encourage them to work on things autonomously.

Being involved in decision making is important to build children's sense of self. Drought can threaten personal identity because it impacts the community. It can also compromise people's ideas of themselves as farmers or country people, especially if they move towns or change businesses. Uncertainty about the future can also be a concern for children if they question who they will become or what they will do if the family's farm or business is not able to function. Open discussion with children about these concerns can help them to feel calmer.

Focus on the positive future for you, your children and your community.

It is important to remind yourself and your children that this drought will pass. Trying to do fun activities together or even making a list of things you are all looking forward will help in keeping a more positive future in focus. Children will also need to tell their stories and talk about their experiences, along with being supported and guided to envision a positive and hopeful future.

If you or children you know are having trouble coping in day to day life, experiencing thoughts of suicide or self-harm, or experiencing distress for more than four weeks, please speak to your GP or other health professional for advice or call Lifeline on 13 11 14. Children can call the Kids Help Line for free, confidential counselling on 1800 55 1800.

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