

Helping Children to Deal With The Emotional Consequences Of Flooding.

The recent flooding across Cumbria has been devastating for a number of families and will impact on many others.

Adults will need to cope with their own sense of loss and range of related emotions as well as deal with practicalities involved with salvaging belongings and rebuilding their homes and lives. Parents and school staff will also need to ensure that they support children to understand and manage their feelings, some of which may appear more exaggerated or changeable than adults'. Although all children who were directly involved in flooding are likely to be affected in some way, for all of them, the guidance and support of caring adults will prevent them being overwhelmed and may encourage longer term emotional resilience and psychological coping skills. Evidence shows that support can be offered at various levels: please see Appendix 1 for details).

Staff Needs

It is important that as adults you ensure that you are looking after your own needs and ask whether you feel at ease supporting children, especially if you have been directly involved in losing your own belongings and home. If you are feeling vulnerable, accept this and discuss it with your head teacher or an appropriate colleague and negotiate additional support within the classroom. If you are comfortable in doing so, share your own feelings honestly but model calm and coping behaviours which demonstrate that you are in control. If you do not feel able to answer a question or discuss your own experiences it is legitimate to deflect such questions (but see below). Suggested coping strategies for adults:

- focus on normal routine,
- share feelings,
- recognise the stress others are experiencing,
- exercise,
- rest,
- spend time with others who have delivered crisis support,
- "things that feel good".

Losses

Losses that might have been experienced include:

- relationships e.g. people or pets;
- a secure familiar environment e.g. home, school, routine;
- objects that give comfort or have significant connections;
- self-image e.g. aspirations, credibility, status;
- skills, abilities.

Vulnerabilities

How children are affected will vary depending on personal circumstances and previous experiences. Those who are likely to be most vulnerable are children who:

- experience significant loss as a result of these floods, such as a pet or farm animals;
- have experienced previous traumatic events;
- have previously experienced anxiety or who have other psychological needs;
- have parents who are struggling to adjust to their losses or who have psychological issues themselves;

- have parents who work for the emergency services.

Child Development

Children's understanding of loss varies according to age:

- Between 0-4 years it is "emergent" but they can appreciate some of the events around them, more so if they are directly affected by immediate changes in routines and comfort: they may not understand the long term consequences;
- Between 4-8 years understanding is still limited and largely related to their personal experiences but children may still struggle to understand loss fully and may develop "magical thinking" and fantasise about things they have lost;
- Between 7-16 + years understanding is more mature and many clearly have a developed appreciation of the consequences of loss for themselves and others.

Children and adults may experience a range of emotions related to loss including, shock, distress, anger, denial, guilt and relief. These may be felt in quick succession or over longer periods of time: most people "recover" within a few months but for a few this may take up to 2 years or longer.

Getting Back to Normal

Teachers and carers can help restore children's sense of security by reassuring them that the following are all completely normal and show their minds are helping them to deal with what has happened, so that they can accept their experiences and return to "normality":

- heightened feelings of anxiety, including worrying about things which did not used to bother them such as water, bridges or mess;
- having flashback images of scenes which they witnessed;
- struggling to concentrate on school work because of being pre-occupied with events and wanting to talk about it all the time;
- dreaming about the floods or wider environmental disasters, people being in trouble or a range of losses;
- finding it hard to sleep or not wanting to eat;
- changes in mood or untypical behaviour.

Supporting Children and Young People

- maintain as many normal routines as possible and where feasible seek support to let children continue to attend their usual school even if they have had to move some distance from their home;
- ensure close contact with peers and friends;
- maintain usual expectations about learning skills, but be alert to fluctuations in concentration;
- monitor all children for signs of stress which might include prolonged periods of distractibility or daydreaming, weepiness, differences in social behaviour or changes in behaviour: oppositional behaviours are normal reactions to the uncertainty of this situation and should be managed with sensitivity and care whilst explaining that the usual rules still stand.
- let children know that what they are experiencing is the normal way of coping and reassure them that they will eventually feel better;
- help define the reality of loss by sharing factual information in ways which are appropriate and accessible for different age groups;

- encourage relaxation and comfort;
- praise children for coping so well (especially if they have played a part in supporting a relative or neighbour);
- share stories about communities pulling together, emergency services and voluntary agencies working efficiently; politicians taking a personal interest etc;
- enable children to take positive control and explore if they have ideas about what school or community groups might do to support each other over the next few months for Cumbrians and wider communities;
- allow and enable children to talk about their experiences, where possible in controlled way: encouraging them to “park” thoughts by writing them or drawing them until it is safe to share them more openly;
- stay alert to children revisiting earlier traumas or losses: accept that this is natural but discourage dramatisation;
- encourage reflection on what skills, qualities, strengths and practical activities children use to help them get through stress;
- ensure that information is shared with parents and carers, especially if the child appears to be particularly stressed about something..

Don't

- minimise the sense of loss and the impact it may have on feelings;
- try to cajole others to “pull their socks up” or tell them they will soon get over it;
- change the subject or dismiss discussion about it;
- overcompensate;
- dwell on the event;
- promise things you cannot deliver.

Developing Resilience

Finally, a key role of adults supporting children will be to help them develop resilience. This can be described as:

“The ability of an individual to successfully recover from, or adapt to, adversity and to develop social/emotional and academic competence despite exposure to life’s problems”
(Making the Difference, 2000)

To develop resilience, research indicates that young people need:

- at least one caring parent or another supportive adult in their family or social world
- to be socially integrated
- good educational experiences
- opportunities to take control/make choices.

Curriculum

After research following other severe floods staff from the University of Cumbria stressed the importance of reintegrating children (and families) into community structures such as schools as soon as possible after the flood and of creating safe spaces such as ‘circle time’ within the school classroom for pupils to explore their flood experiences. One of the key issues identified in aiding “recovery” was colleague and peer support which helped foster feelings of loyalty and a sense of belonging. Circle time (see Appendix 2) is clearly one way of consolidating this and it involves creating an emotionally safe space for pupils to explore what they think and feel, bounded by ground rules for teachers and children, and based on respect and safety from exposure or ridicule. Children’s experiences of the floods can also be incorporated into the curriculum in various subjects including PSHE, Art, English, Geography and Science. In addition to this, almost all schools in Cumbria are familiar with

SEAL and its intention to build resilience. It will be important to use these materials and wider pastoral support to continue helping children do this through enabling:

- positive self-regard;
- good interaction and social skills;
- good coping strategies, e.g. knowing when to ask for help;
- the ability to understand what has happened to themselves and others and to be able to express their feelings;
- the ability to reflect;
- good problem solving and planning skills;
- awareness of others and their needs;
- multiple social roles.

Summary

In summary, the key messages of this guidance are that although many children who were directly involved in the floods may experience short term changes in their feelings and behaviour which will act as ways of helping them deal with stress and loss. The ways that adults support and manage this is important both immediately but also in order to secure longer term resilience. Some children, especially those who have experienced previous trauma or extreme stress, or those with psychological issues may need to be seen by a more specialist professional, but these will be in the minority.

If you would like to discuss any of the advice offered here or are particularly worried about a child, please contact your school's educational psychologist or encourage parents to visit their GP, who may make a referral to a clinical psychologist or other professional.

Additional Resources:

With Hindsight: Health and Safety Guide to Critical Incidents in Schools (all schools have a copy but more may be available from Kym Allan)

Cumbria County Psychological Service and Behaviour Support in collaboration with CAMHS (Cumbria Partnership NHS Foundation Trust) and Kym Allan (Children's Services County Manager Health, Safety and Welfare)

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Levels of Support

Level 1: Guidance to schools re whole school approaches

This might relate to everyone (children and adults). Interventions work most effectively when they are integrated into routine rather than “add ons” or medicalised. Guidance is being sent to schools containing commentary re what children might feel, how adults might look after themselves, do's and don'ts, curriculum ideas and group work etc. We are also considering sending this to other professionals for continuity.

Level 2: Consultation with outside agencies

Schools might feel they need additional advice from external professionals about techniques approaches or materials that could be helpful. Agencies who can offer this include educational psychologists and specialist behaviour teachers, locality teams, voluntary agencies and CAMHS.

Level 3: Targeted small group

It may be possible to offer some small group work for children for whom the school thinks this might be beneficial. Further details will be circulated as soon as possible

Level 4: Individual targeted

There will be a few children who have already received support from services such as educational, social care or health professionals **or** who have severe or prolonged reactions to the current situation. If you are particularly worried about a child, contact your school's educational psychologist or encourage the family to contact their GP, who may make a referral to CAMHS or other health professional.

Appendix 2: Circle Time

- Circle time refers to protected time when small groups or whole classes can explore what they think and feel about issues such as flooding. The approach is often seen as most suited to primary aged children but it can also benefit some secondary pupils.
- The sessions should run for approximately half an hour and be led by someone who has pastoral experience and whose own basic skills in emotional literacy are strong.
- The groups need to run in an emotionally safe space, where boundaries are clearly established and communicated. The approach allows issues to be raised in an environment where individuals are all respected and valued.
- A warm up activity to help consolidate the group should begin each session and might include word association games or a round of naming their favourite food, animal or colour.
- The main part of the session should enable every member of the group to speak or pass and an object passed round to signify turns. Topics might include thoughts feelings beliefs worries achievements.
- It can be helpful to include opportunities to build self esteem and resilience: teachers are reminded of the bank of intervention strategies on self esteem and self reflection within Planning for Positive Behaviour. Some children may display high emotions and the strategies in the self control section would be useful to include in the sessions.
- Further advice can be sought through consulting your Educational Psychologist or Behaviour Teacher.