

Advice for adults and parents 3: What to say to children

- Don't force children to discuss the events if they are not ready but calmly answer their questions as they arise.
- Acknowledge that the event(s) did happen. Don't cover up but give out only as much information as is appropriate to the child's level of curiosity and understanding. Your account should be accurate but doesn't need to include overly distressing or unnecessary information.
- When it is over, remind them calmly that the event is over for now. Don't say it will never happen again but say that we can learn from what happened and try to prevent it happening again.
- At the same time as you are recovering from your own distress, suggest that we need to also remember and have sympathy for others affected. Disasters are communal events that affect families, communities, regions and nations.
- Focus on some of the good things that happened – the quick response of the firefighters and volunteers. Mention how many people have come to help, including from overseas.
- Remind them that in a future event, there will many people who will be there to help. In the case of fires, firefighters, police, the defence force, medical staff, community volunteers and so on.
- With older children, conversations can be more sophisticated but keep the event in context with other recent or historical events. Try not to over-dramatise and focus on looking to the future.
- Be prepared for questions about matters that might surprise you, such as about death – how will you deal with these?
- If children are distressed, they might act in ways that are unusual for them. Be patient and let them know that how they are feeling might be different to others but we all process our feelings in different ways.