**Mental Health support for children affected by flooding**

In the disruption that follows a flood it is very easy to forget the fear and anxiety that children may be experiencing during and after a flood.

*How can you best support children through the aftereffects of the flood and what do children and young people say that they need?*

**The impact of flooding on children and families**

After a flood children may have lost their toys, clothing and items with special meaning. If you’re in temporary accommodation, then their surroundings will be unfamiliar. The security of their own home, and usual things has gone. Places where they would normally feel safe and able to relax may be gone. Usual structure and school may be lacking. They may be living 24/7 with parents, and spending a lot more time with them, at a time when both are experiencing extreme stress.

Sometimes it may be necessary to live separately for a temporary period after a flood. Relatives may not have space for the whole family. The family is divided themselves across two temporary homes. This is likely to be out of the ordinary for a child’s usual routine and can cause distress, anxiety and stress too.

Alternative accommodation also means journeys to school may be further. Walking to school with friends – a key time for socialising and downloading stress - may not be an option anymore. School itself may not be an option for a period of time. In addition, longer term relocation, and dispersal of communities for several months, may mean that local neighbourhood friendships are affected.

**This can lead to longer term feelings of isolation and loneliness.**

Experience shows that loss of possessions as a result of flooding has a huge impact on mental health for all ages. Children, in particular, feel the impact of losing personal ‘precious’ items that have childhood memories v. Comments from children who have experienced floods show that other forms of loss are felt very keenly, such as loss of familiar space, friendship, social networks and loss of time.

Children have also reported that the disruption caused by the flood may have other impacts not noted by adults. They may endure a lengthy period of living with uncertainty after the flood event.

Being in temporary accommodation has been reported as particularly difficult, a situation worsened by lack of space, and for some children the upheaval caused by having to relocate several times before they return home. Children often report a sense of lack of control over their own lives.

**Tips for supporting children after a flood**

**Big Ted**

Anything that your child has as a comforter or security blanket, or special toy… should be with them. If this has been lost in the flood recognise the importance of the item to the child and communicate that you understand how difficult this must be. Some, particularly younger children, have reported that the use of a ‘stand in’ toy or item works. Talking you your child and explaining that ‘Big Ted’ is off on an adventure and ‘Little Ted’ has agreed to stand in, can help.

**Routine**

If you can, try to maintain some sort of routine and or continue to do things that were familiar e.g. stories at bedtime. Routine for children will help with anxiety. Their surroundings may have changed or be unfamiliar, but bringing previous routines to, or adapting them slightly for, the new situation will help manage the emotional impact of the situation

**Family Time**

A flood brings many practical difficult tasks. It is natural that there will be less opportunity for ‘family time’. This may bring feelings of guilt as a parent. Be kind to yourself and don’t worry that you can’t have the same time for children as before the flood happened. Talk to your children about this and stress that although there might be less time right now you will be doing your best to make the most of what time there is, and will make sure that the precious time you do have together is special.

**Friends**

Although time is difficult to manage bring friendships together, reuniting your child with friends where possible is a great way to help anxiety and stress in your child. Even if it can’t be at home…meet in the park, cinema, other fun place or online. Experience shows that spending time with people you care about after a flood is one of the main things that will help with stress and anxiety.

**What do Children and Young People say is helpful?**

Researchers asked children (age 6 to 15) who had experienced a flood what advice they would give to their parents and grandparents. This is what they said:

“Make a flood plan with my family to ensure we are more prepared for if it happens again”.

“Offer support, whether it be listening to a child, or providing help via providing hot food”.

“Try to understand the feelings of adults and children affected. Do my utmost to be there for them”.

“Be more honest with the children they need to know what is Happening”.

“Keep my children better informed of flood planning. Hopefully the need will never arise”.

“Ask questions and be aware of the mental effect on children whether directly or indirectly involved”

From <https://nationalfloodforum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Children-Young-People-and-Flooding-Report-Final.pdf>

**Summary**

Helping your child adjust to a situation as emotionally and practically disruptive as a flood involves 5 main steps:

1. Answer your child’s questions truthfully in a way that they can understand. You can also correct misinformation about the event.
2. Set an example for your child by managing your stress and returning to your normal routine and encouraging your child to do the same. Proceeding with your normal daily routine, such as eating meals as a family or returning to school and work, can help reduce stress.
3. If your child’s routines and environment are disrupted, and if you and other caregivers are not able to provide the same consistent care as before, talk about the changes, how long they will last, and what you are doing to create routines and structures.
4. Give your child opportunities to talk about what they went through, or what they think about it. Encourage your child to share concerns and ask questions.
5. Limit exposure to media coverage of the disaster and its aftermath. Children who are directly exposed to a disaster can become upset again if they see or hear reminders of what happened.

Immediately after a disaster, children and adolescents may have these common emotional and behavioural reactions (depending on age)

* Ages 1 to 5: Anxious behaviour, such as fear of being separated from caregiver or other new or increased fears, anger and frustration, unusual naughtiness, withdrawing from others, less interest playing, and difficulty sleeping.
* Ages 6 to 10: Increased anxiety such as fear of returning to school or other new or increased fears, anger and frustration, unusual disobedience, withdrawing from others, less interest in playing, sleep problems, and difficulty concentrating on tasks.
* Ages 11 to 18: Rebellious behaviour, antisocial behaviour, increased anxiety and depression, sleep problems or excessive sleeping.

**How to help children who might need a little more support**

Acknowledging the emotional impact of a flood for children and young people is important. As is, supporting them by being open and honest about what has happened. Following a flood, or any other really distressing event, the most effective way of coping (for adults or children/young people) is to be with and seek help and support from friends and family. And many children will need no more than that. However, you should seek professional support if your child’s distress lasts for more than 2 weeks without change.

For further information to help children under 16 with mental health support click here: [Young people - Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust (leicspart.nhs.uk)](https://www.leicspart.nhs.uk/mental-health/resources/conditions/young-people/)

Teens 16 and over can be referred by a parent or GP to the LLR local NHS Therapies Service. It’s a free and completely confidential service that provides psychological support on a one to one or group basis for residents of LLR aged 16 and over.

Need support? – Click here: [NHS Leicester, Leicestershire & Rutland Talking Therapies (vitahealthgroup.co.uk)](https://www.vitahealthgroup.co.uk/nhs-services/nhs-mental-health/leicester-leicestershire-rutland/)