

Queensland Centre for Perinatal and Infant Mental Health

Growing together through natural disasters - Epidemics

Information and activity sheet for families with babies and young children



Sometimes an illness, such as gastro or a respiratory virus, spreads through a community quite dramatically. It can be alarming for a baby or young child to find their friends and familiar caregivers missing from playgroup or daycare. If the epidemic continues, the child's routines and relationships may be disrupted. They may feel sad (missing their friends), worried (that things will never go back to normal) or unsafe (people are disappearing). Another layer of distress may result if the child or family members get sick themselves.

Little people manage feelings through their relationships with parents and other caring adults. In times of

community illness, it's important to look after your own emotional wellbeing so you can stay calm and support your child.

If your child has no symptoms of illness, but doesn't seem to 'be themselves', think what their behaviour may be telling you about their emotions. They may need you to talk with them about the changes caused by people around them being sick. They may need reassurance and a closer sense of connection with you. Sometimes, they might need more support from their teacher or educator, your doctor or child health nurse, or another expert professional.

In times of stress, babies and young children may

- become worried, but may not have the words to tell you
- be clingy or whiny, cry, seem more helpless or emotional
- have tantrums or become aggressive
- eat less or more than usual
- have trouble sleeping, have nightmares, or seem more tired than usual
- want to be closer to their parents or carers, needing more cuddles

Parents and carers can

- read the story over the page with your child and talk about the pictures
- name your child's feelings, for example, 'You seem to be feeling sad'
- spend time each day having fun with your child, for example blowing bubbles, playing games, reading stories
- make sure your child's favourite toy or blanket is always handy for comfort

- answer questions honestly in language your child can understand, but don't give more information than they need
- maintain regular routines like meal-times, bath-time, getting up time
- limit your child's exposure to media (TV, radio, newspapers, online)
- when your child can hear you talking with other adults about the epidemic, stay positive (seasonal illnesses are normal and usually very treatable, but recovery can take time)

Let others help

- talk with your child's other carers, such as kindy teachers, about how your child is feeling
- do things that are good for you, to look after yourself physically, socially and emotionally

If you or your family are finding it difficult to cope, professional help is available.



Where to get help

- Your doctor or Child Health nurse
- 1300HEALTH 13 43 25 84
- Lifeline (24hr) **131 114**
- beyond blue info line **1300 224 636**



Birdie and the Big Sickness



One day Birdie felt sad and worried.



Mr Frog and lots of their friends were sick, and had to stay home in bed.



Nurse Tom said, 'It's okay, Birdie. We'll take care of your friends.'



Soon Mr Frog and everyone else felt better. They said goodbye to the doctors and nurses.



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Read the full version of Birdie and the Big Sickness, watch the animation, play games and get more information on the Birdie's Tree website. Browse 'Birdie's Tree'

Birdie's Tree - Growing together through natural disasters | CHQ (health.qld.gov.au)

Contact us

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🌐 www.childrens.health.qld.gov.au/our-work/birdies-tree-natural-disaster-recovery

