



Difficult times

Aaron stood beside the hospital bed of his great-grandfather, who was sleeping peacefully. 'When will Pa come back home to his place?' he asked his mum. She knew that her grandfather would not be going home.

Natalia sat next to her dad who was reading the weekend newspaper. He was perusing photos of the floods which deluged homes in northern Queensland. Natalia wanted to know if rain they were having would make the water from the nearby creek come up into their house too.

Marion struggled to know how she was going to explain to her eight-year-old daughter that her young classmate had just been diagnosed with an aggressive terminal cancer and had only months to live.

At difficult times like these, a parent's reaction may be more significant and have a more lasting effect on the child than the actual event. But helping our children is difficult when we too have unanswered questions and are struggling to deal with the crisis or loss.

faith family



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Resource Centre for Children's and Family Ministry, Uniting Church in Australia, South Australia

Youth and Children's Ministry Unit, Uniting Church in Australia, Queensland

Dealing with tragedy

Recent floods and fires caused immeasurable suffering for many families. Those who watched the images on the TV news were shocked and wanted to know how they could help. Those who were affected personally by the calamity will be dealing with the consequences long after many of us have moved on.

Here are some ways to journey with children through difficult times.

- Spend time together as a family. This gives us the opportunity to pick up on signals that children are struggling to deal with something.
- Maintain routine as much as possible to help children see that life is secure and predictable.
- Listen to children. Ask them what they have heard and how they feel about it. Don't create distress when there is none.
- Respond to children's questions and concerns. Older children may be thinking 'Where is God in all of this?' 'How could a loving God let these terrible things happen?' We need to be honest about what has happened. Don't lie or make up a story to protect them, but there is no need to explain things in graphic detail.
- Don't give easy, pat answers. Share something of our own struggle with their questions.
- Comfort children with assurance of God's loving care for all people. Help them to see God's presence in those who help the people who are going through tragic experiences.
- Read together some of the Bible messages of comfort in difficult and trying circumstances, eg Psalms 23:1-4; Psalm 30:5; Psalm 66:12; John 10:27-28; John 11:25; John 14:27. Talk about what the Bible promises for us in our situation.
- Do something. Children will often feel better when they are given a chance to 'do something'. They may make a drawing, say a prayer or light a candle. Discuss what we can do as a family to support people following the bushfires and floods, immediately and long term. Check what we can do through our church, Red Cross or local charities.
- Pray. Prayer is one of the most important things we can do together. Turn our concerns and God's promises into a conversation with God.
- Watch our children. Difficult situations and crisis are not dealt with in a one-off manner. These concerns will remain in the weeks and months ahead. Kids may revert to 'younger childhood behaviours' if they are anxious or worried about something. They may be quieter than usual or spend more time alone in their bedroom.
- Continue to reassure children that they are loved and that we will be there to help and support them.
- Live one day at a time. The lyrics of the Superchick song remind us that
'...today we remember to live and to love.
We live, we love, we forgive and never give up
Cuz the days we are given are gifts from above.'



faith family



A Christian resource for families



Shared Tears

On Wednesday, 11 February 2009, Nicole hopped into the car after school. 'I gave all my pocket money to the Victorian bushfire appeal today.'

She went on to explain that it was her initiative for some Year Seven students to take buckets to each class and ask for donations.

'Why did you do that?' Mum asked. Nicole simply replied, 'It was the least we could do.'

Her mother continued driving with a warm feeling of pride that her daughter was growing up to be such a caring person. With a tear rolling down her cheek she whispered, 'You are a gift from God'.

Nicole tapped her mother's arm and replied, 'I'm your daughter. It's the kind of thing you'd do.'

Since news of 'Black Saturday' started coming through the television networks, the family had been almost glued to the television — often in tears — as the death toll rose. Photos and interviews with survivors and rescuers brought the reality into their home.

Five-year-old Tyson hadn't understood what was going on. 'Why are you crying?' he asked.

'This is real,' said Nicole. 'Real people are hurt and dying.'

'Do we know them?'

'We don't know yet,' said Dad, shaking his head. 'But it doesn't matter. Like Nicole said, this is not a made-up story. It's real. And it's really sad.'

'Oh,' said Tyson as he hopped on Dad's lap and gave him a hug.

Children witnessing their parents' deep emotions can be a bonding moment. They see their parents'



vulnerability, which may be unexpected and usually not apparent to children.

The tragedy of the Victorian bushfires certainly brought out many honest emotions: shock, disbelief, sorrow, concern, compassion, fear and anger. The nation's response to this crisis was to take action. The outpouring of support was phenomenal. Ordinary Australians like Nicole and her schoolmates (and including people who themselves were experiencing serious flooding) donated blood, food, clothing, household items and money.

It was an overwhelming expression of good will, humanity and benevolence and provided a ray of hope to the affected communities.

The message of Easter, too, is a message of hope. Through the death and new life of Jesus Christ, a new life emerges for all who place their trust in him.

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We went through fire and water. But you brought us to a place where we have everything we need. (Psalm 66:12, NIRV)

Resources for your home

Dave the Donkey

by Andrew McDonough

This book tells the account of Jesus entering Jerusalem from the donkey's perspective. Colourful cartoon style illustrations capture young readers' attention.

Ages 3-8

Hard cover, 28 pages

RRP \$7.95



Easter CD Pack

Arch Books

This pack contains two books.

The Week that Led to Easter and *Jesus Washes Peter's Feet* and a CD that narrates each story and also contains three songs. The CD is great for use in the car or for kids to listen to and follow along in the books.

Ages 5-9

2 books & CD

RRP \$14.95



The Story of Easter

by Christopher Doyle and John Haysom

Tells the story of events leading up to Easter, the Resurrection of Jesus and some of the accounts of Jesus appearing to his friends. It brings the challenge of the message of Jesus to children.

Ages 4-10

Hard cover, 26 pages

RRP \$19.95



When Bad Things Happen

A Guide to Help Kids Cope

by Ted O'Neil

We can't shelter kids from hurt and harm but we can teach them skills for coping with life's big changes and challenges. This book assists children in dealing with the tough questions of life.

Ages 5-10

Paperback, 30 pages

RRP \$14.95



See your local Christian book shop for these and other great resources for your home.

Asset Building



Developmental Assets are like building blocks that children need for a positive start in life. The forty assets identified by Search Institute are grouped into eight categories: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, positive identity.

Decisions, decisions, decisions

Ordinarily six-year-old Blake needs a long time to decide how to spend any money he is given. He considers and re-considers all the possibilities. A visit to a toy store can take several hours. But after hearing about the bushfires, it was an easy choice for him to use Grandma's Christmas money on a toy to give to a child who had lost their home in the fire.

Ten-year-old Luke joined the student representative council at his school. He likes talking about things like recycling and the environment. Luke especially likes helping to decide what to plant in the school's new cactus garden.

Thirteen-year-old Sharon prefers to leave things open until the last possible minute before committing — just in case something 'better' comes up. This is the way to live a 'fun' life, or so she thinks.

We make decisions every day. One of the most significant assets we can give our children is the ability to make decisions and plan ahead.

Planning and decision-making (Asset #32)

As parents we want our children to make good decisions. We can sometimes fall into the trap of making too many decisions for them: what they wear, what they eat and drink, what TV and movies they watch, what music they listen to and what friends they have.

A child's decision-making ability may be limited by their lack of experience or perspective, and they may overlook the consequences of their decisions.

It can be helpful to think of raising good decision-makers as a process. The first part of the process is obviously to teach our children to make good decisions. The second part is to allow them to make their own decisions. The third part of the process is to help children recognise the consequences of their decisions and not be tempted to rescue them from the trouble they may be in because of their decision. This is often the hardest part for parents, but children learn about taking responsibility for their decisions and can learn from any so-called bad decisions.

The level of decision-making 'given' to a child will depend on the child's age, maturity level and past experiences in making decisions. Quite young children can deal with two options about things with limited consequences: do you want to wear your pink T-shirt or your green one? As a child gets older the importance and complexity of decisions they make can be increased.

Ideas to help build this asset:

- Help your child to plan and make decisions that will help them finish their homework and projects on time.
- Talk with your child about the possible consequences of their decisions — to themselves and others.
- Encourage your child to get involved in a long-term project or event that involves planning and decision making.
- Give your child a diary or organiser (and help them use it).

For complete interactive 40 Developmental Assets lists and more information on asset development: go to www.search-institute.org/assets

Disaster's questions

Jesus taught them saying: *'Blessed are they that mourn, for they will be comforted'*. (Matthew 5:4)

At times such as the recent fires and floods in Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales, we are confronted by the suffering and trauma of those involved. These events bring to us the stark reality that no matter how hard we try, no matter how many plans and dreams we have, or even how well prepared we have tried to be, there are times when we are unable to escape suffering. We are confronted by the fact that we are powerless, nothing is permanent, and everything can be taken away in a very short space of time.

Suffering is not limited to these disastrous events. It happens to everyone; in our private lives and in wide spread man-made and natural tragedies world-wide. Some people appear to suffer more than others.

How are we to make sense of this suffering — whether we are in the midst of it or watching from a distance? It is difficult to cope with our own, let alone our children's suffering in moments of extreme devastation. When our children ask us why these things happen, we might well wonder ourselves. Sometimes the answer may be 'because someone made a bad choice'. Sometimes the only answer seems to be 'because they do'.

There are many questions for which we have no answers. These are times when many people look to God and wonder. Many pray when they have

never prayed before. Many struggle to make sense of why these things happen.

What sense, if any, can be made of these tragedies? Can anything good come from these disasters? Can we ever live life to the full again? How do we survive? Can we possibly come out of it better than before it happened? Is there hope for a future?

We certainly do not come out of these hardships unchanged. Some people become permanently bitter and angry, but for many, they will come through the experience stronger and wiser than before. Life forges us in the struggle. A man standing amongst the wreckage of his burnt out house after the fires tearfully said, 'It takes something like this to make you realise that it's people who are important, not things. Things don't matter; people are everything — those you love, your friends and family.'

Christian people live in the hope that God does not abandon us, and that in fact God loves us more than we can ever comprehend.

So much so that he sent Jesus to be with us as a fully human person. This God who loves us is not distant or remote, but involved with humanity and all that happens. And that includes all the people who are caught up in despair and desolation.

Jesus promised that he would be with us always. Suffering and death are not the end. On what do we base this hope?



New life from the ashes

Easter's answer

What is Easter really about? What is 'good' about Good Friday — a day when the man Jesus was put to death in a brutal way?

It is on that cross that Jesus went through all the fires and the floods with the people he loves and came to save. A few days later Jesus came back to life, overcoming death and bringing us into life — forever.

The presence of God is seen in many different guises. It may be the fire fighters, the doctors and nurses, the person providing a cup of tea or handing out some clothes to wear.

Whatever happens, and in many different ways, God is with us. He has 'been there and done that'. He is our hope and he does not give up on us.

This is the peace that passes all understanding. God is with us; God is for us.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, [we can add: neither fires nor floods] nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:38,39

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*Caring for the lives
and faith of children,
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