

READY FAMILIES,  
RESILIENT  
COMMUNITIES

# PARENTS PLAYBOOK



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## ABOUT THIS PLAYBOOK

You have just experienced a natural disaster. This can be disorienting, difficult and very emotional. This booklet is designed to support you and your children engage in fun and meaningful activities, with needing minimal or no toys!

Short interactions with your children can help lift both you and your child's spirits, even momentarily.



## HELPFUL TIPS:

- ♥ Keep activities short (10-15 minutes) and fun.
- ♥ Praise effort, not just results.
- ♥ Let your child lead—follow their interests.

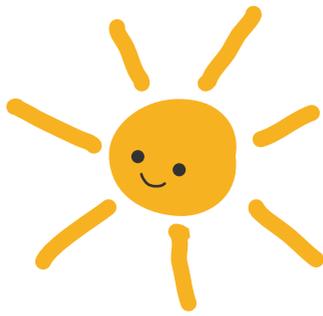


# BIG FEELINGS LITTLE PEOPLE

## Supporting Young Children Through Natural Disasters

Natural disasters such as floods, fires, storms and heatwaves can be frightening for adults — and even more confusing for young children. Babies and young children may not understand what is happening, but they do feel the stress, disruption and emotional changes around them. How adults respond plays a powerful role in helping children feel safe and recover.





### **How Young Children Experience Big Events**

Children aged 0-5 experience the world through relationships, routines and emotions rather than logic. When these are disrupted, their behaviour often changes.

Common emotional and behavioural responses include:

- Increased clinginess or separation anxiety
- Crying, tantrums or emotional outbursts
- Regression (sleeping difficulties, toileting accidents, wanting bottles or dummies again)
- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns
- Fear of loud noises, darkness or being alone
- Withdrawal or quietness
- Re-enacting events in play

These responses are normal stress reactions, not “bad behaviour”. They reflect a child’s developing nervous system trying to make sense of uncertainty.

### **Why Big Feelings Happen**

Young children’s brains are still developing their ability to regulate emotions. During stressful events:

- The brain’s alarm system (stress response) activates quickly
- Children rely on adults to help them calm down (co-regulation)
- They may not have the language to explain feelings, so emotions show up in behaviour

This is why warm, responsive caregiving is one of the strongest protective factors for recovery.



# What Helps Children Feel Safe Again

## 1. Stay Calm and Present

Children take emotional cues from adults. You don't need to hide your feelings — but modelling calm breathing, steady voices and reassurance helps children regulate.

Try saying:

- “You are safe with me.”
- “That was scary, but we are together now.”

## 2. Keep Routines Where Possible

Predictability builds safety.

Helpful anchors include:

- Regular meals and snacks
- Consistent sleep routines
- Familiar songs, stories and play times
- Even small routines provide comfort.

## 3. Offer Extra Connection

After stressful events, children often need more closeness.

Support this by:

- Holding, cuddling and sitting close
- Making time for play together
- Following your child's lead in play (especially pretend play)
- Connection supports emotional healing.

## 4. Help Children Name Feelings

Label emotions in simple language:

- “You look worried.”
- “That noise made you jump — that felt scary.”
- “You're feeling upset because things changed.”

This builds emotional literacy and helps children feel understood.



## 5. Use Play as a Healing Tool

Play is how young children process experiences.

Helpful play ideas:

- Drawing or painting feelings
- Playing with toy houses, cars or emergency vehicles
- Role-playing helpers and rebuilding

There is no “right” way — follow your child's cues.



### Signs Your Child May Need Extra Support

Most children recover well with consistent care. Consider extra support if symptoms last more than 4–6 weeks or include:

- Ongoing sleep disruption or nightmares
- Persistent fear or withdrawal
- Extreme separation distress
- Loss of interest in play
- Big behaviour changes that don't settle

Talk to your GP, child health nurse, early childhood professional or playgroup facilitator for guidance.

### Caring for Yourself Matters Too Children are deeply affected by adult wellbeing.

#### Support yourself by:

- Accepting help when offered
- Talking with trusted people
- Taking small breaks where possible
- Being kind to yourself — recovery takes time
- Looking after yourself helps you care for your child.

### REMEMBER

- ✓ Big emotions after disasters are normal
- ✓ Connection builds resilience
- ✓ Calm adults create calm children
- ✓ Play and routine support healing
- ✓ You do not have to do this alone

Your presence, love and consistency are powerful tools in helping your child feel safe again.



# ACTIVITIES AT HOME

## For Babies Ages 1–2 Years

### \* Everyday Household Items

**Kitchen Fun:** Use pots, pans, and wooden spoons for drumming.

**Sorting Game:** Sort plastic containers or lids by size or color.

### \* Sensory Exploration

**Water Play:** Fill a bowl with water and let your child splash with cups or spoons.

**Texture Hunt:** Collect safe items like cloths, sponges, and paper for touch-and-feel play.

### \* Movement & Gross Motor

**Cushion Crawl:** Arrange pillows for crawling over and around.

**Dance Party:** Play music and dance together.

### \* Language & Cognitive

**Story Time:** Tell simple stories or describe what you're doing during chores.

**Name Game:** Point to objects around the house and name them.

**Sing & Clap:** Sing nursery rhymes and clap along to the rhythm.

### \* Creative Play

**Drawing with Nature:** Use sticks in dirt or sand to make shapes.

**Homemade Instruments:** Fill containers with rice, pasta, lentils or beans for shakers.

### \* Outdoor Fun

**Nature Walk:** Collect leaves, rocks, or flowers and talk about them.

**Shadow Play:** Show your child how shadows move in sunlight.



# ACTIVITIES AT HOME

**For Toddlers** Ages 3—5 Years

## \* Creative Play

**Nature Collage:** Collect leaves, flowers, and twigs during a walk and glue them onto cardboard.

**Playdough Creations:** Make shapes, animals, or letters using homemade or store-bought playdough.

## \* Language & Literacy

**Story Time:** Read a favorite book together. Ask questions like ‘What do you think happens next?’

**Alphabet Hunt:** Pick a letter and find objects around you that start with that letter.

**Rhyming Game:** Say a word and have your child come up with words that rhyme.

## \* Math & Thinking Skills

**Sorting Fun:** Sort buttons, blocks, or socks by color or size.

**Counting Snacks:** Count pieces of fruit or crackers before eating.

**Shape Hunt:** Look for circles, squares, and triangles around the house/where you are.



## \* Physical Play

**Obstacle Course:** Use cushions, chairs, and toys to create a safe indoor course.

**Animal Moves:** Pretend to be different animals—hop like a frog, waddle like a duck.

**Dance Party:** Play music and dance together.

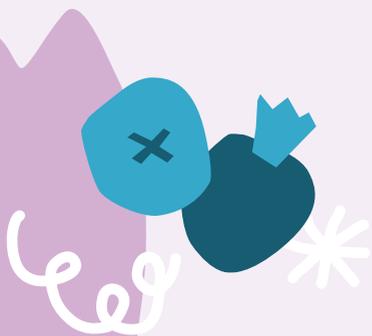
**Tickle Monster:** Chase and tickle your child (if they like this) – laughter can be the best medicine

## \* Sensory Play

**Water Play:** Fill a tub with water and add cups, spoons, and small toys (if you have them).

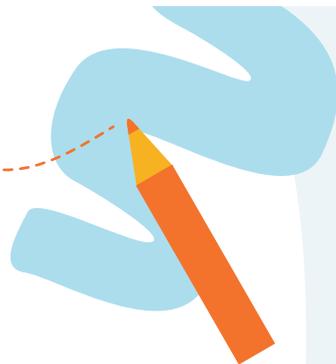
**Rice or Pasta Bin:** Hide small objects in a container of uncooked rice or pasta for your child to find.

**Texture Exploration:** Touch and describe items like soft fabric, rough sponge, smooth stone.



# ACTIVITIES ON THE GO

For Toddlers Ages 3—5 Years



## \* Quiet & Creative Activities

- Coloring books and crayons (use a clipboard or chopping board to lean on)
- Sticker books or reusable sticker pads
- Cutting activity (use magazines, pamphlets, anything from the mailbox etc.)

## \* Sensory & Hands-On

- Small sensory toys (fidget spinners, pop-its) can help fidgety fingers!
- Hugging/squeezing a plush toy

## \* Interactive & Educational

- Storybooks or picture books (or make up stories)
- Audiobooks or kids' podcasts (short stories which can be found on Spotify or You Tube)
- Alphabet or number games
- Simple 'I Spy' games (colors, shapes, animals)

## \* Music & Movement

- Sing-along songs (nursery rhymes, action songs)
- Clapping games or finger plays (e.g., 'Itsy Bitsy Spider')



# ACTIVITIES IN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION OR SHELTER

**For Children** Ages 5 Years and younger

## 🐾 **Sensory Play**

- Water Play: Use a small bowl or sink for supervised splashing.
- Texture Exploration: Collect safe items like cloths, sponges, and paper for touch-and-feel play.
- Sound Play: Use containers with rice or beans as shakers.

## 🐾 **Movement & Gross Motor**

- Dance Party: Play music on a phone and dance together.
- Cushion Crawl: Arrange pillows or folded blankets for crawling and climbing.
- Follow the Leader: Simple movements like jumping, clapping, or marching.

## 🐾 **Language & Cognitive**

- Story Time: Tell stories or read any available books.
- Name Game: Point to objects in the room and name them.
- I-Spy Game: use letters or colours
- Rhyming games: "Tell me something that rhymes with cat"
- Sing Songs: Use familiar nursery rhymes and encourage clapping along.

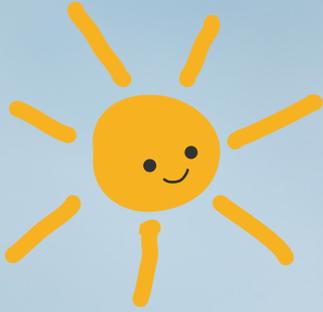
## 🐾 **Creative Activities**

- Drawing: Use paper scraps and pencils or crayons if available.
- Pretend Play: Act out daily |routines like cooking or cleaning using safe items.
- Homemade Instruments: Use empty containers for drumming.

## 🐾 **Outdoor or Space-Limited Fun**

- Nature Walk: If safe, collect leaves or rocks and talk about them.
- Shadow Play: Use sunlight or a flashlight to make hand shadows.
- Simple Ball Games: Roll or toss a soft ball or bundled cloth.
- Airplane spotting: See who can spot the airplane first!
- Car spotting: Who can spot the (red) car first? Rotate between the colours.





# PARENT SELF-CARE

## During Natural Disasters

Taking care of yourself during a natural disaster is essential for your wellbeing and your ability to support your family. Use these tips as a guide.

### Emotional Wellbeing

- Acknowledge your feelings—it's okay to feel anxious or overwhelmed.
- Practice deep breathing or mindfulness for a few minutes each day.
- Limit exposure to distressing news and social media.

### Physical Health

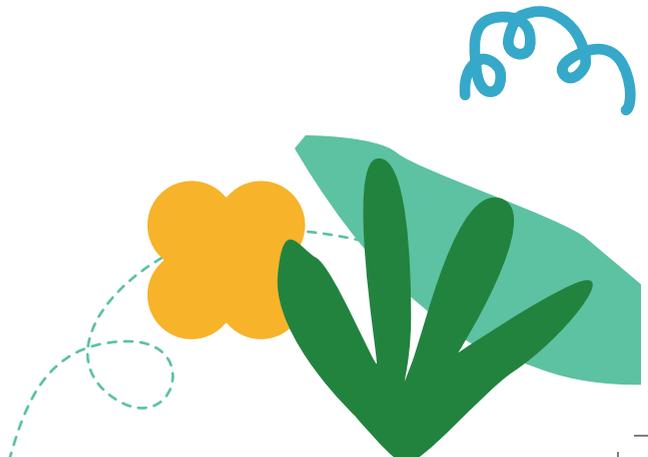
- Stay hydrated and eat regular meals, even if simple.
- Get adequate rest whenever possible.
- Do light stretches or short walks if safe.

### Staying Connected

- Reach out to friends or family for emotional support.
- Join community support groups or helplines.
- Share responsibilities with others when possible.

### Quick Self-Care Ideas

- Listen to calming music or an audiobook.
- Do some deep breathing for 2 minutes.
- Write down three things you're grateful for.
- Take a few minutes for a favorite hobby or activity.



Check out our website for a hive of fact sheets, play activity sheets and insights articles packed full of helpful tips to **ENHANCE YOUR PLAY** at home or on the go.

### Math Through Play

## Using Everyday Activities to Promote Early Numeracy



Children learn best through hands-on, interactive experiences, and play is one of the most effective ways to introduce mathematical concepts to them. Play-based learning helps develop foundational math skills such as counting, recognizing patterns, understanding spatial relationships, and problem-solving—all while building confidence and a positive attitude toward math. By incorporating math into everyday activities, you can help your child develop a strong number sense in a stress-free, enjoyable way.

### Everyday Activities That Promote Early Math Skills

**Cooking and Baking**

- Counting ingredients: "We need three eggs. Let's count them together!"
- Measuring: "Let's fill this cup halfway. What happens if we add more?"
- Sequences: "First, we mix the flour. Next, we add sugar. What comes next?"
- Comparing quantities: "Who has more strawberries on their plate?"




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1800 171 882 (in NSW) or 02 9684 9500

### Encouraging Self-Help Skills in Toddlers (1-3 Years)

One of the most rewarding aspects of parenting a toddler is watching them gain independence and develop self-help skills. Children between the ages of 1 and 3 experience rapid motor, cognitive, and social-emotional developmental growth, making this the perfect time to encourage them to take on simple tasks.




### Why Self-Help Skills Matter

As your toddler becomes more independent, they are able to do things for themselves. This helps to build a sense of pride in who they are and what they are capable of. Their self-esteem is becoming an important aspect of their self-perception in these early years, and helping themselves with everyday tasks fosters a confident and capable sense of self. As their gross and fine motor skills are developing, they are cultivating coordination and building strength through the physical task of doing things for themselves. As they learn, toddlers face frustration and difficulty, which, when supported, can help build resilience, patience, persistence, and problem-solving skills, as well as provide opportunities to practice regulating emotions.

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### Teaching Empathy

## Helping Your Under-3s Develop Resilience

Empathy—the ability to recognize, understand, and share another's feelings—is a fundamental skill that supports emotional intelligence, relationships, and lifelong well-being. Developing an understanding of others is a significant task for young children at this stage of life, but this doesn't mean it's impossible.



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Simply visit [www.playgroupnsw.org.au](http://www.playgroupnsw.org.au) and check out our Thrive Hive parent resource hub.

## Empathy Your Child Understand and Respond to Emotions

cannot simultaneously develop empathy. Nurturing empathy can further enhance their awareness and understanding of their own emotions.

As a parent, it is essential to guide your child to develop empathy. This will help them navigate social interactions with sensitivity, compassion, and understanding.

to recognise, understand, and respond to another person's mental state that involves positive feelings, expanding of their feelings for young children at this doesn't mean they

### Children who learn empathy:

Young children struggle with change and - Build stronger, healthier relationships with friends and family.

- Show kindness, compassion, and consideration for others.
- Become better communicators and problem-solvers.
- Grow into emotionally intelligent and resilient adults.

You play a crucial role in helping your child understand and practice empathy. By modeling empathy yourself and providing opportunities to discuss and practice these skills, you give your child powerful tools to build emotional awareness and connection.



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## Milestones of Gross Motor Development from Birth to Age 6

As your child grows through the early years of life, their gross motor skills—those that involve crawling, walking, running, and jumping—child's ability to move through the world with increasing strength, confidence and coordination as they age is a key indicator

Here's a year-by-year guide to gross motor development from birth to age six, along with at each stage.

**Please Note:** This guide outlines general gross motor milestones for children who do not have pre-existing conditions that may impact their physical development. Every child is unique, and progress may differ due to a variety of factors. If you have concerns about your child's gross motor development, please consult your paediatrician for personalised guidance.

### 0 to 12 Months

#### stones:

- Bring the head while on the tummy
- Bring an arm up during tummy time
- Roll from tummy to back (by 3-4 months)
- Roll from back to tummy (by 6 months)
- Sit independently
- Get back and forth on hands and knees
- Stand (may vary in style)
- Walk with support
- Walk independently

#### How to Support:

- Engage in plenty of tummy time to build neck and core strength.
- Place toys just out of reach to encourage reaching and rolling.
- Offer gentle support for sitting practice.
- Provide safe floor space for crawling practice.
- Encourage reaching for toys while sitting to improve balance.
- Let your child explore standing with stable furniture.



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## Using Outdoor Spaces to Enhance Gross Motor Skills

Young children are naturally active learners, and outdoor spaces provide the perfect environment to develop essential gross motor skills. These skills—running, jumping, climbing, and balancing—are fundamental to a child's physical development, coordination, and overall health. As a parent, you can support your child's gross motor growth by encouraging outdoor play in various settings.



### Gross Motor Skills Matter

- Gross motor skills involve the body's large muscles and are necessary for everyday activities like walking, playing sports, and even sitting upright in a chair. Developing strong gross motor skills helps children with:
- Balance and coordination
  - Core strength and posture
  - Preparing for fine motor skills like writing and cutting

Gross motor skills also help children socialise and express themselves. They enable your child to grow in confidence and become more independent.

Unlike indoor spaces, the outdoors provides children with varied terrain, open space, and natural obstacles that challenge, build, and refine their gross motor abilities. Playing outside also fosters creativity, problem-solving, and resilience as children navigate different physical challenges.

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# THRIVE HiVE

**Join us on the second Tuesday** of every month for our Press Play webinar series, designed to build parent knowledge, confidence and skills in the critical **first 2000 days** drawing on experts in the field on a range of topics curated to help you on your journey.



WEBINAR

## UNLOCK YOUR BABY'S THOUGHTS BABY SIGN LANGUAGE

WITH MEG MAHON

Tuesday, 25<sup>th</sup> July  
7:00 - 8:00pm  
Online via Zoom  
FREE




WEBINAR

## GRANDPARENTS DAY WEBINAR

WITH PARENTING EXPERT  
GAIL MUIR &  
PLAYGROUP NSW BOARD MEMBER  
& GRANDPARENT  
FIONA BROWN

Wednesday, 29 October  
11:00am - 12:00pm  
Online via Zoom  
FREE




WEBINAR

## THE MODERN DAD — REAL TALK, REAL TOOLS, REAL CONNECTION

WITH THOMAS DOCKING, CEO  
OF DADS GROUP & FOUNDER  
OF MAN WITH A PRAM

Wednesday, 3 September  
7:00 - 8:00pm  
Online via Zoom  
FREE





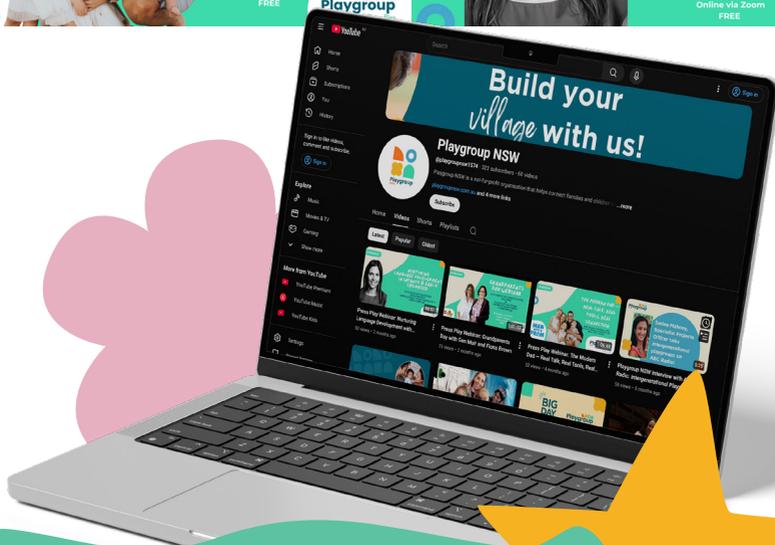
WEBINAR

## NURTURING LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN INFANCY & EARLY CHILDHOOD

WITH ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR  
KAREN MATTOCK  
FROM WESTERN SYDNEY  
UNIVERSITY'S MARCS BABYLAB

Tuesday, 4 November  
11:30am - 12:30pm  
Online via Zoom  
FREE





You can also browse our past webinars:  
<https://www.youtube.com/playgroupnsw>

## OUR WHY



EVERY CHILD,  
EVERY FAMILY,  
EVERY COMMUNITY  
THRIVES IN THE FIRST 2,000 DAYS



## WHO WE ARE

**Playgroup NSW is an early childhood play, connection and support organisation.**

**Through play and co-participation we:**

- ★ Strengthen early childhood development
- ★ Build parent capacity and confidence
- ★ Create safe, welcoming spaces

By building **trusted relationships** early, we connect families to the supports they need, when they need them and support **prevention, early intervention** and **protection** during the critical first 2000 days of a child's development.

## OUR MAGIC

### PLAYGROUPS

We deliver a statewide network of community, supported, targeted and culturally specific playgroups that provide safe, inclusive early learning environments and reach families in the earliest years.

### PEER SUPPORT

We deliver evidence-based peer support programs that reduce isolation, strengthen parental mental health and provide connection and guidance for families navigating parenting and developmental challenges.

### PARENT CAPACITY

We partner with parents and carers as first teachers to build capacity, confidence and skills through early home learning initiatives, digital platforms, education programs and practical resources.

### PEAK BODY

We excel in strategic coordination, governance, workforce and volunteer development, evaluation, research partnerships and system level advocacy for quality and scalability across the playgroup sector statewide. We also lead national capacity building projects funded by government and philanthropy bringing together our interstate colleagues.

## OUR IMPACT

**76,000+**  
**members**

**650+**  
**PLAYGROUPS**  
**AND PEER**  
**SUPPORT**  
**WEEKLY**

**700+ staff**  
**and volunteers**

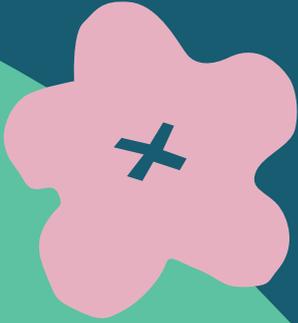
**120,000 HOURS**  
**OF SUPPORT**  
**A YEAR**

**50+ years**  
**in operation**

**99% POSTCODE**  
**COVERAGE**

**Place based,**  
**community led**





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