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Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies

El Niño: keeping learners safe during heatwaves and floods

A Handout for Teachers

October 2026

You do not need any previous training to use this handout. It sets out what to do before, during and after a heatwave or flood so that you can protect and support your learners. **Always follow instructions** from your education and civil protection authorities: where national or local protocols exist, they take priority over this material. **Adapt it according to your context.**

What is El Niño, and why does it matter for my school?

El Niño is a natural climate pattern in which the ocean surface in the central and eastern tropical Pacific becomes warmer than usual, changing winds and weather around the world. It happens every few years and usually lasts about a year. Its effects differ from place to place: depending on where you live, it can bring extreme heat, heavy rain and floods, or drought. El Niño is not caused by climate change, but because it is happening in a world that is **already warmer**, its impacts, such as heatwaves and heavy rainfall, are likely to be more severe than in the past.

According to the World Meteorological Organization's (WMO) update of 3 September 2026, **El Niño is firmly established, is expected to become very strong and to peak towards the end of 2026**, with impacts likely to continue into 2027. Check your national meteorological service for the latest local forecast, as forecasts are updated regularly. Heat and floods put children's lives at risk and interrupt learning. After disasters, girls and the most vulnerable learners face a higher risk of not returning to school.

1. Start now: six actions for every teacher

Find out your risks. Ask your head teacher or local civil protection office: Is our school, or are our learners' routes to school, in a flood-prone area or potentially impacted by landslides? Does our area receive heat alerts? How will warnings reach the school?

Know, share and practise your school emergency plan: the alarm signal, evacuation routes, the safe assembly point (on higher ground for floods) and who does what. If there is no plan, raise it with your head teacher now.

Keep an up-to-date class list with parents' or caregivers' phone numbers (if possible) and who is authorised to collect each child. Keep one copy on your phone and a paper copy in your emergency bag.

Identify learners who need extra support: learners with disabilities or chronic illness, the youngest children, pregnant adolescents, and learners who travel long distances or cross rivers, and learners who have already lived through a flood or extreme heat, who may feel more frightened. Agree a buddy (a peer or an adult) for each learner who may need help to evacuate.

Prepare a classroom emergency bag: class list and contacts, whistle, torch, first-aid kit, drinking water, oral rehydration salts (ORS), small towels and, if available, a thermometer.

Talk calmly with your learners about heat and floods, and practise a drill. Children cope better when they know what to do. Before a drill, tell learners what will happen and what the alarm sounds like, so it does not frighten them. Keep messages simple and hopeful, focusing on what we will do to stay safe, and invite questions.

COPE
Make the Difference. Be Ready!

Use age-appropriate materials, such as the COPE Disaster Champions manuals on heatwaves and floods. Available here and in multiple languages. Cope Disaster Champions

2. Heatwaves: adapt, recognise, act

Children, especially the youngest, depend on adults to stay safe in the heat. Young children take longer than adults to adjust to hotter weather (about 10 to 14 days), and children often do not drink enough unless reminded. Adults must actively help them stay cool and hydrated.

Adapt
Keep learners cool and hydrated
Keep the classroom cooler

Recognise
Watch for signs of heat stress and dehydration

Act
Respond quickly and seek help if needed

Heat also affects how learners feel and learn. **On hot days, tiredness, poor concentration and irritability can be signs of heat stress, not misbehaviour.** Respond with water, shade and rest rather than punishment.

Adapt — Keep learners cool and hydrated

- Offer regular water breaks, for example, every 30 minutes, and allow learners to drink whenever needed. Do not wait for learners to ask. Where safe water is scarce at home, let learners refill bottles at school if possible.
- Avoid sun exposure in the hottest hours. Move breaks and outdoor activities to cooler times and stop vigorous physical activity on very hot days.
- Relax uniform rules: allow light, loose clothing and hats. Encourage shade and sunscreen where available.
- Adapt lessons: shorter tasks, calmer activities and more frequent rests Postpone tests and demanding tasks on very hot days where you can.
- Open windows and doors early in the morning (or overnight, if safe) to let heat out. Close them when the air outside becomes hotter than inside.
- Close curtains or blinds on sunny windows without blocking airflow.
- Switch off lights and equipment that are not in use, as they add heat.
- Move lessons to the coolest, most shaded rooms or spaces available.

Recognise the signs and act

MILD signs: act at school

Thirst, dry lips or sticky mouth; heavy sweating, headache, dizziness, dizziness or weakness; nausea or vomiting; muscle cramps; heat rash; irritability or "not being themselves". Young children may cry without tears.

What to do:

- Move the learner to a cool, shaded, ventilated place to rest.
- Cool the skin with wet clothes on the forehead, neck, armpits,wrists and forearms. Where possible, let the learner apply them themselves.
- Give clean water in small, frequent sips. If the learner is fully awake and can swallow. If they have been sweating a lot, you can give ORS mixed exactly as the packet says.
- Stay with them, inform parents or caregivers and seek medical help if they do not improve.

SEVERE signs: medical emergency

Confusion, not responding clearly or unusual drowsiness; fainting or collapse; seizure (fit); very hot skin, especially without sweating; rapid breathing or heartbeat..

What to do:

- Cool the body at once while you wait: move to shade, loosen clothing and remove outer layers such as jumpers, jackets, shoes and socks.
- Call emergency services or take the learner to the nearest health facility immediately.
- Sponge or spray cool water on exposed skin (face, neck, arms, hands, legs and feet) and fan the body.
- Do not give medicines such as paracetamol unless a health worker advises it. Do not put **young children in ice-cold water.**

The most dangerous warning sign is a **change in mental state (confusion, not responding, unusual sleepiness).** Cool first and get medical help immediately.

Protect the learner's dignity; explain what you are doing, ask before touching, never remove underwear and, where possible, have a second adult present, but do not delay cooling while waiting for help. Follow your school's safeguarding policy. Afterwards, reassure the learner and the classmates who saw what happened.

3. Floods: before, during, after

Before: when heavy rain or a flood alert is forecast

Know the **warning levels** used in your area (for example green, yellow, orange, red) and what each one means for your school.

Know and practise **your evacuation route** to higher ground, including with learners with disabilities. Check routes for steps and obstacles, and use bells, flashing lights and hand signals so that every learner receives the alert. **After the drill**, ask learners whether they received the warning and could use the route, and fix any difficulties before the next drill.

Protect learning materials: move records, books and equipment above the likely flood level, in watereproof containers where possible.

Ask your head teacher who switches off the school's electricity and gas in an emergency, and where the main switches are. If nobody is assigned, ask for someone to be named in the school plan.

Agree with your head teacher and families when children will be kept at school or sent home, and how messages will reach families (phone, text messages, messaging groups, radio), Never send a child's home alone along routes that may cross rivers or flooded roads. Identify risk areas and plan alternative routes in advance.

During: a flood warning is issued or water starts rising

If you are told to evacuate, or you think you are in danger, leave immediately. Use a calm, firm voice and short, clear instructions. Keep the youngest learners and those with a buddy close to you, and tell learners that adults are looking after them.

Take your class list and emergency bag. Count your learners before leaving, on arrival and regularly afterwards.

Move to higher ground. If you cannot leave safely, go to the upper floors of a strong building.

Turn around, don't drown! Never walk, swim or drive through moving water. Fast-moving water only 15 cm deep can knock a person off their feet.

Do not switch off electricity or gas yourself unless it is your role in the school emergency plan and you are standing on dry ground. Otherwise, leave it and focus on getting learners to safety

Keep everyone from rivers, drains, tunnels and roads that dip under bridges. Treat all floodwater as dangerous: it can hide open drains and carry electric current from fallen cables you cannot see. Never touch fallen power lines or anything touching them.

Stay with your learners until each one is handed to an authorised carer, and note who collected each child. Never leave a child alone or send them off with someone not on your list.

EVACUATE IMMEDIATELY

Do not wait.
Safety first.

COUNT EVERY LEARNER

Before leaving,
on arrival and
regularly afterwards.

WATER IS DANGEROUS

It can hide hazards
and carry electricity.

After: when the water goes down

Return only when the authorities say the building and routes are safe. Do not use electricity until a trained person has checked it.

Keep children away from floodwater and from clean-up work. Water can be contaminated and hide sharp objects, open drains, snakes or live wires.

Promote hand washing with soap and use only safe drinking water. Food that has touched foodwater should be thrown away.

Prevent mosquito-borne diseases such as dengue, Zika and chikungunya: once a week, empty, scrub, turn over or cover anything that holds water, in the school grounds and at home. These mosquitoes bite mainly during the day, including during school hours.Refer learners with fever, rash or joint pain to health services. Follow local health advice on protecting learners from mosquito bites

**STAY SAFE.
STAY PREPARED.
PROTECT
EVERY LEARNER.**

4. Supporting our learners

Normal reactions to stressful situations: fear, sadness, anger, trouble sleeping or concentrating, headaches or stomach aches, clinging to adults, or young children behaving as if they were younger. **Most children recover with care**, routine and support from adults they trust. **You do not** need to be a counselor to help. What makes the biggest difference is a safe and predictable classroom, warm relationships, helping learners manage their feelings, noticing who is struggling and linking them to help.

What you can do: psychological first aid (Look, Listen, Link)

Look

Check who is missing, injured, very upset or alone, and who has lost their home or belongings Watch for changes that do not improve over time: withdrawal or "going quiet", aggression, not eating, falling behind, or frequent absence. These are signals to link the learner to support.

Action: Welcome each learner back by name, and spend a few minutes each day checking in, for example by asking learners to show how they feel with a thumb, a colour or a drawn face.

Listen

Let learners talk, draw or play if they want to, without forcing them. Stay calm, and give simple, honest, age appropriate information. Do not ask for details of what happened, do not make promises you cannot keep, and never promise to keep abuse a secret.

Link

Connect learners and families to help: health services, social services, child protection, school counselor or psychologist. Know these contacts before you need them

Calm

Teach and practise simple calming activities with the whole class, such as slow breathing, gentle stretching, or naming five things you can see. Use them at the start of the day or when the class feels tense.

Restore routine

Keep a safe and predictable classroom. Use play, art, movement and group activities. Give learners small helpful roles, such as reminding classmates to drink water or helping younger children.

Families

Tell parents and caregivers that these reactions are common, what helps at home (routine, reassurance, listening, limiting frightening news) and who to contact if they are worried. Ask them to tell you about changes they see at home.

Refer immediately

If a learner talks about wanting to hurt themselves, discloses abuse or violence, or shows severe distress that does not improve. Follow your school's child protection or mental health support procedure.

4. Supporting our learners

Some learners may worry about the next heatwave, storm or flood, especially as the impact of El Niño may continue into 2027. Acknowledge their feelings, and focus on what the school and community are doing to keep everyone safe and what learners themselves can do.

Leave no learner behind

Learners with disabilities: keep the buddy system and accessible alerts, and check whether glasses, hearing aids, wheelchairs or medicines were lost or damaged.

Girls and adolescent girls: ensure privacy, safe toilets, water and menstrual supplies at school and in shelters. Be alert to higher risks of gender-based violence, child marriage and child labour after disasters, and follow up quickly when a girl stops attending.

Boys and adolescent boys: may be pressured to work or join clean-up activities, and may be less likely to show distress openly. Follow up when they stop attending or change behaviour.

Pregnant learners, very young children and learners with chronic illness are at higher risk during heat: check on them more often, even after the heatwave ends.

Displaced, hungry or most affected learners: be flexible about uniforms, materials, homework and deadlines.

Keep learning going

Contact the family of every absent learner as soon as possible, and keep a simple record of who has returned.

If the school closes, use take-home learning packs, phone calls, radio or messaging groups, focusing on priority skills (reading, writing, numeracy) and wellbeing. Agree on arrangements in advance with learners and their families/caregivers, and check that learners with disabilities can access and use the activities and materials. Keep in regular contact with each learner, not only to set work but to ask how they are.

On return, start with wellbeing and routine. Check where learners are before moving on, and catch up in short steps rather than simply resuming the syllabus where it stopped.

Look after yourself too, and your colleagues.

You may also be affected. Rest, drink water, eat regularly, and keep some time for yourself.

Pair up with a colleague to check on each other and share tasks.

Notice signs of stress in yourself, such as exhaustion, irritability or trouble sleeping.

Feeling affected is normal; asking for help is a sign of strength. Talk to your head teacher or a support service.

Head teachers: plan time for staff to rest, share experiences and support each other.

Teachers who are safe and supported are better able to support their learners.

If you remember 3 things



IN A HEATWAVE: SHADE, DRINK, AND KEEP COOL

Water, shade and rest prevent heat illness. Offer water regularly, for example every 30 minutes on hot days. Confusion, fainting or collapse in the heat is an emergency. Cool the body at once and get medical help. Do not give drinks to a learner who is not fully awake.



WHEN TOLD TO EVACUATE, GO AND TAKE EVERYONE WITH YOU

When told to evacuate, go immediately. Never walk or drive through moving water during flooding. Count your learners and hand them only to authorised carers.



SUPPORT LEARNERS AFTERWARDS

Check on every learner, listen, link anyone who needs more help, restore routine and follow up anyone who does not return.

My key contacts (fill in and keep in your emergency bag)

Emergency number (ambulance, fire, civil protection)	.....
Nearest health facility	.....
Local civil protection or disaster management office	.....
Heat teacher or school emergency focal point	.....
Child protection or social services focal point	.....
Weather alerts (national meteorological service website or app)	.....
Education authority (district or municipal)	.....

Main sources

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