

Helping Children Cope with Disasters

Disasters can leave children feeling frightened, confused and insecure. Whether a child has personally experienced trauma or seen the event on television, it is important for adults to be informed and ready to help if reactions to stress begin to occur.

Children may react to disaster by showing fear, sadness or behavioral problems. Younger children may begin bedwetting again, have sleep problems or separation anxiety. Older children may show anger or aggression. They may withdraw or develop school problems.

Who is at Risk?

Most children's reactions to disasters are brief. They are normal reactions to "abnormal events." A smaller number of children can be at risk for more long-lasting distress if they have any of these risk factors:

- Direct exposure to the disaster, such as being evacuated, seeing injuries or death of others, being injured themselves or fearing their life is in danger.
- The death or serious injury of family or friends.
- On-going stress from the effects of disaster. This includes temporarily living elsewhere, loss of friends, loss of personal property, parental unemployment, and the slow return of the family to pre-disaster life and living conditions.

A Child's Reaction to Disaster by Age

Below are common reactions in children after a disaster or traumatic event:

Birth through 2 years. When children are pre-verbal and experience a trauma, they do not have the words to describe the event or their feelings. However, they can retain memories of particular sights, sounds, or smells. Infants may be more irritable, crying more than usual, or wanting to be held and cuddled. The biggest influence on children of this age is how their parents cope.

Preschool - 3 through 6 years. Preschool children often feel helpless and powerless in the face of an overwhelming event. Because of their age and small size, they lack the ability to protect themselves or others. As a result, they feel intense fear and insecurity about being separated from caregivers. In the weeks following a traumatic event, preschoolers' play activities may reenact the incident or the disaster over and over again.

School age - 7 through 10 years. The school-age child understands that loss can be permanent. Some children become preoccupied with the traumatic event and want to talk about it continually. This preoccupation can interfere with the child's concentration at school and academic performance. They may display a wide range of reactions—sadness, generalized fear or specific fears of the disaster happening again, guilt over action or inaction, anger that the event was not prevented or fantasies of playing rescuer.

Pre-adolescence to adolescence - 11 through 18 years. Older children's responses are more similar to adults. Teenagers may mask fear by engaging in risky behaviors, such as reckless driving, alcohol or drug use. They may become fearful of leaving home and avoid regular activities. Adolescence is a time to start moving out into the world. After a trauma, the world can seem dangerous and unsafe. A teenager may feel overwhelmed by intense emotions and yet feel unable to discuss them with others.

Meeting the Child's Emotional Needs

How a child copes with disaster or emergencies is often tied to the way parents cope. They can detect adults' fears and sadness. Parents and adults can make disasters less traumatic for children by taking steps to manage their own feelings and plans for coping. Parents are almost always the best source of support for children in disasters. One way to establish a sense of control and to build confidence in children before a disaster is to engage and involve them in preparing a family disaster plan. After a disaster, children can contribute to a family recovery plan.

Adults should encourage children and adolescents to share their thoughts and feelings about the incident. Clarify misunderstandings by listening to children's concerns and answering questions. Maintain a sense of calm by validating children's concerns and perceptions and with discussion of concrete plans for safety.

Listen to what the child is saying. If a young child is asking questions about the event, answer them simply without the elaboration needed for an older child or adult. Some children are comforted by knowing more or less information than others; decide what level of information your particular child needs. If a child has difficulty expressing feelings, allow the child to draw a picture or tell a story of what happened.

Try to understand what is causing anxieties and fears. Be aware that following a disaster, children are most afraid that:

- The event will happen again.
- Someone close to them will be killed or injured.
- They will be left alone or separated from the family.

Reassuring Children after a Disaster

Suggestions to help reassure children include the following:

- Personal contact is reassuring. Hug and touch your children.
- Calmly provide factual information about the recent disaster and current plans for insuring their safety along with recovery plans.
- Encourage your children to talk about their feelings.
- Spend extra time with your children such as at bedtime.
- Re-establish your daily routine for work, school, play, meals, and rest.
- Involve your children by giving them specific chores to help them feel they are helping to restore family and community life.
- Praise and recognize responsible behavior.
- Understand that your children will have a range of reactions to disasters.
- Encourage your children to help update your a family disaster plan.

If you have tried to create a reassuring environment by following the steps above, but your child continues to exhibit stress, if the reactions worsen over time, or if they cause interference with daily behavior at school, at home, or with other relationships, it may be appropriate to talk to a professional. You can get professional help from the child's primary care physician, a mental health provider specializing in children's needs, or a member of the clergy.

Monitor and Limit Your Family's Exposure to the Media

News coverage related to a disaster may elicit fear and confusion and arouse anxiety in children. This is particularly true for large-scale disasters or a terrorist event where significant property damage and loss of life has occurred. Particularly for younger children, repeated images of an event may cause them to believe the event is recurring over and over. If parents allow children to watch television or use the Internet where images or news about the disaster are shown, parents should be with them to encourage communication and provide explanations. This may also include parent's monitoring and appropriately limiting their own exposure to anxiety-provoking information.

Prepare Now

Preparing for disaster helps everyone in the family accept the fact that disasters do happen, and provides an opportunity to identify and collect the resources needed to meet basic needs if a disaster should happen. Preparation helps; when people feel prepared, they cope better and so do children.