



HEALTH SYSTEM
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Your Child

Helping Children Cope with Disasters and Traumatic Events

Disasters like tornados, earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, fires, or violent acts can be very scary for children. Children may relate what they see on the news to themselves and their lives. How children understand the event depends on their stage of development.

Pre-School

Young children often mix up real and pretend.

They might not know quite what happened in the disaster, but they will know that people around them are upset or sad. When preschool children see the news on TV, they may not know that the news often shows the same event again and again. They may think the scary event keeps taking place.



When disaster or trauma directly affects

children this age, they will need help adjusting

to loss, change, and fears. Young children rely on parents, family and teachers to help them through tough times. They may regress and start to suck their thumb again, or wet the bed.

Problems with eating, sleeping, and complaints of pain are also common. They may be scared of monsters, strangers or the dark. They may also act out or pull into themselves.

Sometimes they want to talk about the event a lot and even add parts that did not really happen.

School age

School-age children can understand more about the disaster than preschool children can.

They may want to hear about what happened from trusted adults and receive comfort.

Children this age can feel personally affected by news stories.

When the disaster affects them directly, they may have many of the same responses as preschool children. They may also pull into themselves, refuse to go to school, do poorly in school, act out, or have trouble paying attention.

- Help children find the good things within the tragedy. For example, when people help each other, take heroic action, and donate medicine and food to survivors.
- Show your children how the world organizes to work together. For example, through the International Red Cross or the United Nations Relief Fund.
- Teach children about the science used to predict, stop and deal with natural disasters.
- Make a family emergency plan, so your kids know your family is ready, and they know what to do.
- Help your child find ways to show their care for survivors of disaster, especially other children.



Risk Factors

Some kids are at higher risk for problems in coping with disaster. Children at risk may:

- Have reacted strongly in the past to disasters.
- Live in or have relatives in places that have had natural disasters.
- Have had stressful events in their family, like divorce, serious illness, or death of a family member or friend.
- Have an emotional or learning problem.

To help these kids, reassure them. Explain what your family and local and government officials are doing to make sure they are safe. Watch for signs that they are not coping well.

Warning Signs

Children react in different ways to disasters. Some react right away and others react weeks or months later. How they react depends on their age, risk factors and personality or temperament. Watch for warning signs like these:

- Staying very close to parents at all times (“clinging”)
- Fear of being apart from parents
- Fears that do not go away
- Sleep problems like nightmares and bedwetting
- Refusal to go to school
- Acting out at home or school
- Being irritable or jumpy
- Trouble paying attention or concentrating
- Headaches, stomachaches or other physical problems
- Pulling into themselves, not doing normal activities
- Feeling very sad or low energy
- Thinking about the disaster all the time

If you are concerned about your child, ask their health care provider for advice and referral to someone who can help. Sometimes counseling for the whole family is a good idea. Parents need to know that they, too, can suffer from trauma after a disaster.

Resources

Fax: (203) 785-4608

Web Site: www.nccev.org/violence/children_terrorism.htm

Reference

Koplewicz HS, Cloitre M, McClough J, Gurian A, Kamboukos D, Levine E, Pearlman M, Wasser R. Caring for Kids After Trauma, Disaster and Death: A guide for parents and professionals, 2nd ed. New York University Child Study Center. Available from: http://www.aboutourkids.org/files/articles/crisis_guide02.pdf.

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