



Helping Children Cope with Disasters

Natural or man-made disasters, terrorist attacks or acts of war are upsetting for children. Even watching them on T.V. or seeing the effects on adults they care about can cause children distress. It is normal for kids to feel worried, sad, nervous, and scared during these kinds of events. But, there are things you can do to help children cope with disasters.



What are the signs of distress?

Children's reactions to disaster and their signs of distress vary by age:

For infants to 6 year olds

Infants and preschoolers may be cranky and clingier. They may cry more than normal and when most upset may lose some of their recently gained milestones and begin to bed wet, have trouble sleeping or even stop talking.

For 7 to 10 year olds

Older children who know about loss may feel sad, mad or scared. They may be worried that a disaster will happen again and that their loved ones will be more affected. Their friends may share rumors, so parents or caregivers should look out for these and try to correct false information. Older children may focus on details of the event and want to talk about them all the time. This may make it hard for them to concentrate on normal activities like school.

For preteens and teenagers

Some preteens and teenagers react with risky behaviors. This could include increased reckless driving, alcohol or drug use. Others may be afraid to leave home. They may cut back on how much time they spend with their friends. They can feel overwhelmed by strong emotions but not be able to talk about them. Those emotions may make them moody and lead to arguing or fighting with siblings and parents.

For children with special needs

Children who use a ventilator or a wheelchair, or other assistive equipment may have stronger emotional reactions to disasters. This is also true for youth with other physical or mental disabilities. They may feel stressed, worried or angry because they have less control over how they get around than other people. They may need extra reassurance, and more hugs and other positive physical contact.

For more information on how to help children cope with a disaster, visit

<http://emergency.cdc.gov/preparedness/mind/parents/>

or

http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/oes-bsu-02/child_e.html

Are there ways to tell how strongly children will react to a disaster?

Yes, there are things that may make some children respond strongly to a disaster. Some might have more severe, longer-lasting reactions based on the factors below:

- Direct exposure to the disaster: being hurt, being evacuated, seeing people who were hurt or died, or seeing severe damage to property (home and neighborhood).
- Loss: the death or serious injury of a family member, friend or pet.
- Continued stress from the effects of disaster: this includes being away from home, losing touch with friends and neighbors, and losing things that were important to them, like a favorite toy. Children's lives are disrupted when their routines and housing change.
- Earlier trauma: including having lived through, seen abuse, or a major disaster can lead to stronger reactions.

What can I do to help my children cope during a disaster?

Be there for them:

Children need to know that you are there for them. The best way to do this is to spend time with your children and to tell them that everything will be alright. Help them express their concerns by asking them questions about how they feel and what they are thinking. Since things are constantly changing in disaster situations, children may have many questions. You may need to discuss issues more than once. Stay flexible and open to answering repeated and new questions and providing clarifications. If you have to evacuate suddenly, tell your children briefly where you are going and that you will answer their questions once you get to safety.

How do I answer questions?

Answer questions briefly and honestly, but also ask your children for their thought about what you discuss. For younger children, try to follow conversations about a disaster with a favorite story or a family activity to help them feel more safe and calm.

Ensure their physical well-being:

Help children take care of themselves by encouraging them to rest, exercise, and eat properly. Be sure there is a balance of quiet and physical activities. Try to engage your children in activities familiar to them (such as certain games, reading, etc.).



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