

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH A DISASTER

Cooperative Extension Service * University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign * Disaster Resource

Preparing for a disaster and coping with it afterwards can sometimes be difficult for children and their families. Children may be frightened by the disaster itself, or be upset by disruptions that a disaster might cause in their daily routines or their relationships with parents, teachers, and friends. It is not unusual for children to show changes in behaviors that may be signs or symptoms of distress or discomfort following a disaster.

Young children may be especially affected during these times because of their sense of vulnerability, their lack of understanding, and their difficulty in communicating how they feel. Older children may be affected as well, and like their younger siblings might find it difficult to express their feelings.

Following a disaster, some children may:

- Be afraid of the disaster recurring, or become anxious when there is rain, storms, sirens, or other reminders of the disaster;
- Become easily upset, or cry and whine more frequently;
- Get angry, act out, or get into trouble;
- Become more active, restless, “jumpy” or have difficulty paying attention;
- Be afraid to sleep alone, or want to sleep with a parent or another person. They may have nightmares or difficulty falling asleep;
- Have difficulty with separation or be afraid to be left alone. Children may not want to be out of parents’ sight and may refuse to go to school or their childcare provider;
- Behave as they did when younger. They may start sucking their thumb, wetting the bed, asking for a bottle, or clinging and wanting to be held;

- Have symptoms of illness such as nausea, vomiting, headaches, or not wanting to eat;
- Be quiet and withdrawn, or not want to talk about the experience;
- Keep wanting to talk about it (older children) or keep having “disaster themes” in their play or stories (younger children);
- Feel guilty that they caused the disaster because of some previous behavior.

These changes in behaviors are common in children who have been through a disaster, and are natural responses to stress. Some of these symptoms may last for weeks or months, but should diminish over time. Except for extreme circumstances (when a family member is killed or severely injured or the child is hurt or traumatized), most children do not develop serious or permanent psychological problems.

Some children may not show any outward sign of being upset. Other children may not give evidence of being upset until several weeks or months later.

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For more information contact your local Extension office:



Disaster Resources Web site:
<http://www.ag.uiuc.edu/~disaster>

What parents can do to help children cope:

Keeping children informed, supporting them emotionally, and getting them involved in the family's efforts to prepare for or recover from a disaster will keep the family together. Pulling together through adversity will strengthen the family in ways that will last long after the crisis is resolved.

Make time to comfort and reassure your children.
The stress of coping with adversity can be distracting for adults. Who has time to comfort a child when the flood water is rising? Just a moment of your time, a gentle hug, or a reassuring word may be all children need to feel more safe and secure in an emotional situation.

Speak simply and honestly about the situation.
Explain to your children what is happening to your family. Use simple words they can understand. Be honest. With a preschool child use words like, "Jenny, we have to leave our home for a while because the water is getting higher and is going to come into our house. We cannot stay. We are going to aunt Mary's house for a while." Do not sugar coat a grim situation. Do not exaggerate. Keep children informed of a problem that will directly affect them.

Help young children understand the disaster.
Children are frightened by things they don't understand. You can explain how tornados, storms, or hurricanes are formed, and how these are unusual but natural patterns of weather. Children should know that they were not responsible for causing a disaster, and that disasters are not some kind of punishment for something they did.

Reassure children about the family safety. Because young children sometimes have difficulty understanding complex situations, they can easily exaggerate their normal fear of being separated from their parents. Reassure them with statements like, "Yes, the water is dangerous. But you and Mommy, and Daddy, and your little brother will be safe. The Red Cross will find us a safe place to stay until the water goes back down."

Maintain routines or rituals of comfort. Dinnertime at the kitchen table, a bedtime story, an afternoon nap or a favorite teddy at bedtime may provide young children with a sense of security. Older children have their own routines and favorite activities as well. Crisis activity and relocation can cause severe stress with any person because of the disruption of the familiar. Maintaining some routine activities and rituals of comfort during disruptive times can provide children with a sense of stability and control.

Talk with children about how you feel and suggest a positive response. Say something like, "Mommy feels very sad about leaving home. Very sad. That is why I am crying. Come and give Mommy a hug." Giving children something to do makes them feel a part of the family response to the adversity.

Put words of acceptance to your children's feelings and experiences. Say something similar to "Yes Tommy. It's okay to cry. Taffy (the family pet) will come back to our house when we return too. She will be fine at Uncle Ned's. He will take very good care of her." You do not have to "fix" how the child feels. Be a good listener and supporter.

Give children something productive to do appropriate for their age. Making them a part of the family's disaster efforts can give them a sense of control and contribution. Helping make sandwiches, carrying water, or filling sandbags help children feel a part of their family. Keep them involved in a safe way. Let them know you appreciate their efforts to help the family. Be sure not to overburden them with responsibilities, however, and remember that they need time to play and be with friends.

Show children models of courage, determination, coping, and support. Draw children's attention to those within and outside of the family who face the adversity or who provide support. "Daddy is doing all he can, Ivani. He was up all night putting sandbags around the house. Our neighbors are doing the same. We are all working together." Point out ways of coping that you use. "When I feel sad I think of the good times we have had and remind myself that things will be better soon".

Take time to calm yourself. Take a brief break from the crisis. Take a two-minute walk to cool off and calm down. Try for just a few moments to relax mentally. You will be able to provide more support to your family if you do.

Seek professional support if needed. If you are worried about your child showing symptoms that are severe or lasting too long, seek professional advice from your minister, physician, or mental health agency. You can also get referrals from your local Cooperative Extension Service or American Red Cross office. **In Illinois, you can call the Farm Resource Center Hot Line at 1-800-851-4719.**

Issued by Aaron Ebata, Extension Specialist, University of Illinois. Adapted from information developed by the Clemson University Extension Service and the Kansas State University Cooperative Extension Service. March 1997.

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