



Some Coping Strategies for Children

- A. Rebuild and reaffirm attachments and relationships. Love and care in the family is a primary need. Extra time should be spent with children to let them know that someone will take care of them and, if parents are survivors, that their parents have reassumed their former role as protector and nurturer. Physical closeness is needed.
- B. It is important to talk to children about the tragedy- to address the irrationality and suddenness of disaster. Children need to be allowed to ventilate their feelings, as do adults, and they have a similar need to have those feelings validated. Reenactments and play about the catastrophe should be encouraged. It may be useful to provide them with special time to paint, draw, or write about the event. Adults and older children may help pre-school children reenact the event since pre-school children may not be able to imagine alternative “endings” to the disaster and hence may feel particularly helpless.
- C. Parents should be prepared to tolerate regressive behaviors and accept the manifestation of aggression and anger especially in the early phases after the tragedy.
- D. Parents should be prepared for children to talk sporadically about the event- spending small segments of time concentrating on particular aspects of the tragedy.
- E. Children want as much factual information as possible and should be allowed to discuss their own theories about what happened in order for them to begin to master the trauma or reassert control over their environment.
- F. Since children are often reluctant to initiate conversations about trauma, it may be helpful to ask them what they think other children felt or thought about the event.
- G. Reaffirming the future and talking in “hopeful” terms about future events can help a child rebuild trust and faith in his own future and the world. Often parental despair interferes with a child’s ability to recover.
- H. Issues of death should be addressed concretely.

Fear and Anxiety

Fear is a normal reaction to any danger which threatens life. What is a child afraid of after a disaster? They are afraid of recurrence, injury, and death. They are afraid of being separated from their family. They are afraid of being left alone. A child who is afraid, "is afraid", and a child's emotions must not be ignored. The child needs to be reassured by the parents.

What Can Parents Do To Help Their Child?

It is very important for the family to remain together. The child needs reassurance by the parent's words, as well as their actions. Listen to what the child tells you about their fears. Listen when they tell you how they feel, and what they think of what has happened. Explain to the child, as well as you can, about the tornado, about the known facts and, again, listen to them. Encourage them to talk. Statements like "I know you're afraid", or "It is a scary feeling", are helpful and should be used. Being told it is normal and natural to be afraid is also reassuring. A child's fear does not need to completely disrupt their and their family's activities. The child can and should be included in the activities necessary in returning order to the family life. For the parents of a very young child, the task is more difficult. Such a child may need more physical care, more holding. This makes it harder for parents to attend to the other things that should be done. Unfortunately, there is no short-cut. If the child's needs are not met, the problem will persist for a longer period of time.

Settling Down

After the "excitement" of the event has passed, some degree of lethargy may set in for both the parents and children. It is very important that parents make a deliberate effort to avoid inactivity and get back to normal routines. Parents should indicate to the child that they are maintaining control; they should be understanding but firm, supportive and make decisions for the child. Parents may become more permissive, but discipline has to be maintained.

Bedtime Problems

The most frequently reported problem that parents encounter with their children occurs at bedtime. The child may refuse to go to their room and sleep by themselves. When they go to bed, they may have difficulty falling asleep. They may wake up often during the night. They may have nightmares. It is natural for a child to want to be close to their parents and for their parents to want their child near them. Parents should also be aware of their own fears and their own uncertainty of the effects these have upon the child. Getting angry at the child, punishing, spanking, or shouting at them

will rarely help. If the child come out of their room, calmly return them to it and reassure them of your presence nearby. It may be helpful to leave a nightlight in the room.

Regressive Behaviour

A child may sometimes revert to "childish" behaviour, for example, thumb sucking, bed wetting, bad dreams, disobedience, and clinging. These behaviours are normally of short duration. When parents overreact to these behaviours these symptoms will persist much longer. Children respond to praise, and parents should make a deliberate effort not to focus on the child's immature behaviour.

How Can The Parents Recognize When to Seek Professional Help?

Most parents are capable of helping their children overcome fears and anxiety. However, it is not a sign of failure if the parents find that they are unable to help their child by themselves. A phone call to a pediatrician, family physician, or the district health unit would prove helpful. In most instances, the most helpful response would be for someone to come and talk with you and your family. In cases of severe anxiety, early action will result in a return to normal. Parent will recognize quite soon whether their attempts to help the child have been successful. If the sleeping problem continues for more than a few nights, if the clinging behavior does not diminish, if the fears become worse, then it is time to ask for professional advice. Child and family councilors are specially trained to help people in distress. They can help parents cope with, and understand the reactions of the child. By talking to the parents and the child either individually or in groups, a child's fear can be overcome more easily.

Notes on Sources

The information on "Children's Reactions to Disasters" was drawn from a brochure entitled "Coping With Children's Reactions to Earthquakes and other Disasters" prepared by Norma Gordon and Stephen J. Howard of the San Fernando Valley Child Guidance Clinic, 9650 Zelzah Avenue, Northridge, California. We wish to thank the San Fernando Valley Child Guidance Clinic for permission to use the information in our flyer.