

Children's Reactions To Disaster

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A Disaster, whether community wide or involving only a single family, may leave children especially frightened, insecure, or upset about what happened. They may display a variety of emotional responses after a disaster, and it is important to recognize that these responses are normal.

How a parent reacts will make a great difference in the child's understanding and recovery after the disaster. Parents should make every effort to keep the children informed about what is happening and to explain it in terms that they can understand.

The following list includes some of the reactions you may see in your child:

- Crying/Depression
- Inability to concentrate
- Bedwetting
- Withdrawal and isolation
- Thumbsucking
- Not wanting to attend school
- Nightmares
- Headaches
- Clinging/fear of being left alone
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Regression to previous behaviors
- Excessive fear of darkness
- Fighting
- Increase in physical complaints

Some things that will help your child recover are:

- Hug and touch your child often.
- Reassure the child frequently that you are safe and together.
- Talk with your child about his/her feelings about the disaster. Share your feelings too. Give information the child can understand.
- Talk about what happened.
- Spend extra time with your child at bedtime.
- Allow children to grieve about their lost treasures; a toy, a blanket, a lost home.
- Talk with your child about what you will do if another disaster strikes. Let your child help in preparing and planning for future disasters.
- Try to spend extra time together in family activities to begin replacing fears with pleasant memories.
- If your child is having problems at school, talk to the teacher so that you can work together to help your child.

Usually a child's emotional response to a disaster does not last long. Be aware that some problems may not appear immediately or may recur months after the disaster. Talking openly with your children will help them to recover more quickly from the loss. If you feel your child may need additional help to recover from the disaster, contact your Employee Assistance Program, or your Mental Health Association.