

Helping Children Cope with a Disaster

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 relationships with parents, teachers, and friends. It is not unusual for children to show changes in behaviours 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 they were younger. They may start sucking their thumb, wetting the bed, asking for a bottle, or clinging or want 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- Be quiet and withdrawn, or not want to talk about the experience.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 behaviour.

These changes in behaviours 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 never diminish over time. Except for extreme circumstances (when a family member is killed, 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.

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 during a disaster? Right now a moment of your time, a gentle hug, or a reassuring word may be all children need to feel more safe and secure during this difficult, often emotional time.
- 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 pre-school child use words like, "Jenny, we have to leave our home for a while because the tornado has damaged it. 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 do not 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 the 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 wind was dangerous. But you, mommy, daddy, and your little brother are safe now."
- Maintain routines or rituals of comfort. Dinnertime at the kitchen table, a bedtime story, an afternoon nap, or a favourite teddy at bedtime may provide young children with a sense of security.
- Older children have their own routines and favourite 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 security and control.
- Talk with children about how you feel and suggest a positive response. Say something like, "Mommy feels very sad about what happened. 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." 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 them.