

Helping Young Children Cope After a Natural Disaster

Overview

Ways to help young children cope with fears and anxiety related to natural disasters like floods, hurricanes, brush fires, and earthquakes.

- Understanding your child's fears
- The importance of security and routine
- Helping your child
- Common reactions
- If fears continue

Although every child's reaction to stress will be unique, there are some common ways that children respond to natural disasters and the disruptions they can bring to everyday life. The following information is meant to help you understand and ease your child's fears.

Understanding your child's fears

Children who have been involved in a natural disaster are afraid of many of the same things that adults are afraid of: that the event will happen again, that they or their family will be hurt, or that they will be separated from family members. They may also have fears based on misconceptions of what has happened.

The importance of security and routine

Children take tremendous comfort in the routines of ordinary family life -- in knowing where their belongings are, when and where they will eat their meals, and what will happen at bedtime. Young children who are displaced because of a natural disaster, or whose families are experiencing the inconveniences of power and water shortages, can find the disruption to their daily routines very difficult. Although you may temporarily not be in a position to resume your ordinary family life, there are things that you can do to help your child maintain a sense of security. It can help to:

- *Reassure your child that you are there to protect him*, and that your family is safe.
- *Provide extra physical reassurance.* Hugging, sitting close to read a book, and giving back-rubs can help restore a child's sense of safety.
- *If you can, give your child a comforting toy or something of yours to keep* -- a scarf, a photograph, or a note from you. Your child may be afraid of separating from you, and keeping a reminder of you close by can help.
- *Be available as much as you can* for talking with and comforting your child.
- *If your child's daily routine has been interrupted*, let him know that this is only temporary. (You will probably need to repeat this many times.)

Helping your child

Open, thoughtful communication with your child will help comfort and reassure her. The following guidelines can help:

- *Ask your child what she thinks has happened.* If she has any misconceptions, this is a chance for you to help her. If a child knows upsetting details that are true, don't deny them. Instead, listen closely and talk with her about her fears.

- *Help your child talk about the event by letting her know that it is normal to feel worried or upset.* Try to listen carefully and understand what she is really trying to say. Help younger children use words like “angry” and “sad” to express their feelings.
- *Try to be patient when your child asks the same question many times.* Children often use repetition as a source of comfort. Try to be consistent with your answers and information.
- *If your child seems reluctant to talk, ask her to draw pictures of what happened,* and talk about the pictures with her.
- *Encourage your child to act out her feelings with toys or puppets.* Don’t be alarmed if she expresses angry or violent emotions. Instead, use the play-acting to begin a conversation about her worries or fears.
- *Talk with your child about your own feelings,* but try to find other adults to talk with about your anxieties and frustrations. Children pick up on their parents’ emotions, and will tend to feel more frightened and helpless if that’s how their parents appear.
- *Shield your child from graphic details and pictures in the media.* They will only make her more anxious.

Common reactions

Here are some common reactions associated with traumatic events and ways to help your child deal with them:

- *Regression.* Many children may try to return to an earlier stage when they felt safer and more cared for. Younger children may wet the bed or want a bottle; older children may fear being alone. It’s important to be patient and comforting if your child responds this way.
- *Thinking the event is their fault.* Children younger than 7 or 8 tend to think that if something goes wrong, it must be their fault -- no matter how irrational this may sound to an adult. Be sure your child understands that he did not cause the event.
- *Sleep disorders.* Some children have difficulty falling asleep, others wake frequently or have troubling dreams. If you can, give your child a stuffed animal, soft blanket, or flashlight to take to bed. Try spending extra time together in the evening, doing quiet activities or reading. Be patient. It may take a while before your child can sleep through the night again.
- *Feeling helpless.* Powerlessness is painful for adults and children. Writing thank-you letters to people who have helped, working to rebuild a community, and caring for others can bring a sense of hope and control to everyone in the family.

If fears continue

Sometimes a child's fears last long after the event, interfering with his enjoyment of everyday life. If your child has persistent problems with any of the following, it's important to consult your doctor for a referral to expert help:

- troubled sleep or frequent nightmares
- bedwetting
- fear of darkness, imaginary monsters, or bad people
- fear of going to school, going outside, or being left alone
- thumb sucking
- unusual quietness, unresponsiveness, or tiredness
- unusual agitation or aggression
- excessive clinging