



How to Help Children Cope with a Disaster

Disasters can leave children feeling frightened, confused, and insecure. Whether a child has personally experienced trauma, has merely seen the event on television, or has heard it discussed by adults, it is important for parents and teachers to be informed and ready to help if reactions to stress begin to occur.

Children may respond to disaster by demonstrating fears, sadness, or behavioral problems. Younger children may return to earlier behavior patterns, such as bed-wetting, sleep problems, and separation anxiety. Older children may also display anger, aggression, school problems, or withdrawal. Some children who have only indirect contact with the disaster but witness it on television may develop distress.

Steps

- 1 Take steps to manage your own feelings and plans for coping.** How a child copes with disaster or emergencies is often tied to the way parents cope because children can detect adults' **fears and sadness**. Parents are almost always the best **source of support** for children in disasters. One way to establish a sense of control and to **build confidence** in children before a disaster is to engage and involve them in preparing a family disaster plan. After a disaster, children can contribute to a family recovery plan.
- 2 Build and use social support systems of family, friends, community organizations and agencies, faith-based institutions, or other resources.** Parents can build their own unique social support systems so that in an emergency situation or when a disaster strikes, they can be supported and helped to manage their reactions.
- 3 Understand that a child's reaction to a disaster is brief and represents normal reactions to "abnormal events."** A smaller number of children can be at risk for more enduring psychological distress as a function of three major risk factors:
 - Direct exposure to the disaster, such as **being evacuated**, observing injuries or death of others, or experiencing injury along with fearing one's life is in danger
 - Loss/grief: This relates to the death or serious injury of family or friends
 - On-going stress from the secondary effects of disaster, such as temporarily living elsewhere, loss of friends and social networks, loss of personal property, parental unemployment, and costs incurred during recovery to return the family to pre-disaster life and living conditions.
- 4 Know that in most cases, depending on the risk factors above, distressing responses are temporary.** In the absence of severe threat to life, injury, loss of loved ones, or secondary problems such as loss of home, moves, etc., symptoms usually diminish over time.
- 5 Encourage children and adolescents to share their thoughts and feelings about the incident.** Clarify misunderstandings about risk and danger by listening to children's concerns and answering questions. Maintain a sense of calm by validating children's concerns and perceptions and with discussion of concrete plans for safety.
- 6 Listen to what the child is saying.** If a young child is asking questions about the event, answer them simply without the elaboration needed for an older child or adult. Some children are comforted by knowing more or less information than others; decide what level of information your particular child needs. If a child has difficulty expressing feelings, allow the child to draw a picture or tell a story of what happened.
- 7 Try to understand what is causing anxieties and fears.** Following a disaster, children are most afraid that the event will happen again; someone close to them will be killed or injured; and that they will be left alone or **separated from the family**.

8 Create a reassuring environment for your children.

- Personal contact is reassuring. Hug and touch your children. Spend extra time with your children such as at bedtime.
- Calmly provide factual information about the recent disaster and current plans for insuring their safety along with recovery plans. Encourage your children to talk about their feelings.
- Re-establish your daily routine for work, school, play, meals, and rest. Involve your children by giving them specific chores to help them feel they are helping to restore family and community life. Praise and recognize responsible behavior.
- Understand that your children will have a range of reactions to disasters.
- Encourage your children to help update your [family disaster plan](#).

9 Talk to a professional if you have followed the steps above and your child continues to exhibit stress, the reactions worsen over time, or if your children cause [interference with daily behavior at school, at home, or with other relationships](#). You can get professional help from the child's primary care physician, a mental health provider specializing in children's needs, or a member of the clergy.

10 Monitor and limit your family's [exposure to the media](#). News coverage related to a disaster may elicit fear and confusion and arouse anxiety in children. This is particularly true for large-scale disasters or a terrorist event where significant property damage and loss of life has occurred. Particularly for younger children, repeated images of an event may cause them to believe the event is recurring over and over.

- If parents allow children to watch television or use the Internet where images or news about the disaster are shown, parents should be with them to encourage communication and provide explanations. This may also include parent's monitoring and appropriately limiting their own exposure to anxiety-provoking information.

Tips

- Preparing for disaster helps everyone in the family accept the fact that disasters do happen, and provides an opportunity to identify and collect the resources needed to meet basic needs after disaster. Preparation helps; when people feel prepared, they cope better and so do children.
- Parents are almost always the best source of support for children in difficult times. But to support their children, parents need to attend to their own needs and have a plan for their own support.
- Promote your own physical and emotional healing by healthy eating, rest, exercise, relaxation, and meditation. Maintain a normal family and daily routine, limit demanding responsibilities on yourself and your family. Participate in memorials.

Sources and Citations

- [Ready America](#) – Original source. Public domain (U.S. Government Work)

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