

Helping Children Cope with Disaster or Trauma

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.

Who Is at Risk?

For many children, reactions to disasters are brief and represent 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, can exacerbate symptoms.
- **Loss or grief** relating to the death or serious injury of family or friends can make reactions stronger.
- **Ongoing 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, make stress symptoms more severe.

What Creates Vulnerabilities in Children?

In most cases, depending on the risk factors above, distressing responses are temporary. Symptoms usually diminish over time in the absence of severe threat to life; injury; loss of loved ones; or secondary problems such as loss of home, moves, and so forth. For those who were directly exposed to the disaster, reminders of the disaster, such as high winds, smoke, cloudy skies, sirens, or other reminders, may cause upsetting feelings to return. Having a prior history of some type of traumatic event or severe stress may contribute to these feelings.

Children's coping with disaster or emergencies is often tied to the way parents cope. They can detect adults' fears and sadness. Parents and adults can make disasters less traumatic for children by taking steps to manage their own feelings and plans for coping. 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.

A Child's Reaction to Disaster by Age

Below are common reactions in children after a disaster or traumatic event:

- **Birth through 2 years** – When children are preverbal and experience a trauma, they do not have the words to describe the event or their feelings. However, they can retain memories of sights, sounds, or smells. Infants may react to trauma by being irritable, crying more than usual, or wanting to be held and cuddled. The biggest influence on children of this age is how their parents' cope. As children get older, their play may involve acting out elements of the traumatic event that occurred several years in the past and was seemingly forgotten.
- **Preschool (3 through 6 years)** – Preschool children often feel helpless and powerless in the face of an overwhelming event. Because of their age and small size, they lack the ability to protect themselves or others. As a result, they feel intense fear and insecurity about being separated from caregivers. Preschoolers cannot grasp the concept of permanent loss. They can see consequences as being reversible or permanent. In the weeks following a traumatic event, preschoolers' play activities may reenact the incident or the disaster over and over.
- **School age (7 through 10 years)** – The school-age child has the ability to understand the permanence of loss. Some children become intensely preoccupied with the details of a traumatic event and want to talk about it continually. This preoccupation can interfere with the child's concentration at school, and academic performance may decline. At school, children may hear inaccurate information from peers. They may display a wide range of reactions – sadness, generalized fear, specific fears of the disaster happening again, guilt over action or inaction during the disaster, anger that the event was not prevented, or fantasies of playing rescuer.
- **Preadolescence to adolescence (11 through 18 years)** – As children grow older, they develop a more sophisticated understanding of the disaster event. Their responses are more like adults. Teenagers may become involved in dangerous, risk-taking behaviors, such as reckless driving, or alcohol or drug use. Others can become fearful of leaving home and avoid previous levels of activities. Much of adolescence is focused on moving out into the world. After a trauma, the view of the world can seem more dangerous and unsafe. A teenager may feel overwhelmed by intense emotions and yet feel unable to discuss them with others.

Meeting the Child's Emotional Needs

Children's reactions are influenced by the behavior, thoughts, and feelings of adults. Adults should 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.

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.

Try to understand what is causing anxieties and fears. Be aware that following a disaster, children are most afraid of these possibilities:

- The event will happen again.
- Someone close to them will be killed or injured.
- They will be left alone or separated from the family.

Reassuring Children After a Disaster

Suggestions to help reassure children include the following:

- Personal contact is reassuring. Hug and touch your children.
- Calmly provide information about the recent disaster and current plans for ensuring their safety, along with recovery plans.
- Encourage your children to talk about their feelings.
- Spend extra time with your children such as at bedtime.
- Reestablish 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.

It may be appropriate to talk to a professional if you have tried to create a reassuring environment by following the steps above, but your child continues to exhibit stress; the reactions worsen over time; or they 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 religious or spiritual leader.

Use Support Networks

Parents help their children when they take steps to understand and manage their own feelings and ways of coping. They can do this by building and using social support systems of family, friends, community organizations and agencies, faith-based institutions, or other resources that

work for that family. 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. As a result, parents will be more available to their children and better able to support them. Parents are almost always the best source of support for children in difficult times. However, to support their children, parents need to attend to their own needs and have a plan for their own support.

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.

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