

Helping Parents Cope with Disaster

Tip Sheet

Anyone who is a parent knows how hard it can be to raise a child. Add a stressful situation, like a natural disaster or other emergencies, and a difficult job gets even harder. When disasters happen, it is important to remember the health and well-being of yourself and your children. If you are prepared for potential disasters, you can be more confident in your ability to keep your family safe, and your children are likely to handle the disaster better as well.

It is difficult to predict how children will react when disasters occur. Some children may not seem to be upset while others may have an emotional reaction or a change in behavior. Changes in emotions and behaviors can occur immediately or after a short delay.

Potential Reactions to Disasters:

Common Emotions:

- Shock and surprise
- Anxiety and tension
- Confusion
- Fear or worry
- Grief
- Anger
- Guilt and shame
- Helplessness
- Isolation
- Despair and sadness
- Numbness
- Fear of being alone

Behavioral Changes:

- Crying
- Eating patterns
- Sleeping patterns
- Anger or short temper
- Fatigue
- Hyperactivity
- Restlessness
- Difficulty concentrating



When talking to your child, be sure to present a realistic picture that is both honest and manageable. Be aware that after a disaster, children may fear that:

- They will be separated from family, and they will be left alone.
- The event will happen again.
- Someone will be injured or killed.



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How Can I Help My Children Cope?

Regardless of your child's age, remember to:

- Model coping through calm reactions, even though you may be stressed. If you feel unable to control your emotions, seek out help and support from family or professionals.
- Keep routines as consistent as possible.
- Answer questions openly and honestly and at a level they can understand.
- Allow your children to talk about the event from their point-of-view. Let them know you will listen to their concerns and questions. Help them label and cope with their feelings. Let them know it is okay if they feel angry or sad.
- Reassure your children that you love and will care for them.
- Provide a peaceful household (and school experience).

Ages birth to 5:

- Children should have limited exposure to media and adult conversations about crisis and disaster.
- They should spend ample time with loving, reassuring adults.
- Parents should provide plenty of physical contact (for example, hugs and cuddles).
- Offer reassurance, especially at bedtime.
- Provide opportunities to be physically active.

Ages 6 to 12:

- Spend ample time with loving, reassuring adults.
- Provide verbal and physical reassurance that you are with them and will care for them.
- Limit repeated exposure to adult discussions and the news media. Watch with them and talk with them about what they are seeing and hearing, how they feel about it, and what it means for them and the family.
- Provide opportunities to talk and play, be creative and physically active.
- Provide reassurance, especially at bedtime.

Ages 13 to 18:

- Let them know your whereabouts and make sure you know where they will be.
- Provide time to talk and interact with peers.
- Allow opportunities to contribute in the family or assist others in responding to the crisis or community needs if they are interested.
- Give encouragement and support in taking care of themselves: eating well, sleeping sufficiently, exercising regularly.
- If you are staying in a shelter or in other unfamiliar surroundings, talk to your teen about staying safe.
- Talk with your teen about their feelings and discuss ways to help them cope.

For more information, please contact:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
National Center for Injury Prevention and Control
Division of Violence Prevention

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