Helping Children Recover From Disasters

Fact Sheet FS702







Cooperative Extension

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY HEALTH SCIENCES

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When children witness violent events, directly or on television, they become frightened and confused. This is normal. Disasters can strike quickly without any warning. They take many forms. Disasters may be:

- Weather-related, as in tornadoes, hurricanes, or floods
- Accident-related, as in automobile or plane deaths or drowning
- Illness-related as in AIDS, cancer, or heart attack
- Bizarre and unusual, as in the case of terrorists, snipers, or a murder

Emotional Impact of a Disaster

The emotional impact of a disaster on children and adults can be tremendous. Children look to parents and other adults for help. The way adults react to an emergency gives children a pattern to copy. If adults react with alarm or fear, children likely will be more upset. They can sense the tension in those around them. Children's reactions depend on the amount of disasters they have witnessed and the closeness of the disaster to their own lives. A child's age also affects how they respond to a catastrophe. At different ages parents should look for behavior changes like this that may be triggered by a disaster:

- Younger children may return to bed-wetting or thumb-sucking.
- School age children may not want to go to school.
- Adolescents may have emotional outbursts or conflicts with parents.

One of the challenges for parents is that they often must deal with their children's reactions and fears when they have not had time to deal with their own reactions to the disaster. Parents should take care of themselves, even if it is a little at a time, so they will be able to take care of their children.

According to the American Red Cross, after a disaster children are most afraid that:

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

Following a disaster some children may:

- Be afraid of loud noises like thunder, alarms, or sirens
- Cling to their mother or father
- Be upset at the loss of a special toy or favorite blanket
- Become quiet and withdrawn, not wanting to talk about the experience
- Have nightmares
- Be afraid to sleep alone or be left alone
- Show anger (hitting, kicking, throwing objects)
- Become restless, anxious, or easily startled
- Lose their power of concentration
- Cry or whine easily

Parents should be alert to these changes in a child's behavior. Some children may not show evidence of being upset until weeks or months later.

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What Parents Can Do to Help Children Cope

Parents and other adults must offer reassurance and emotional support to children of all ages. To help children cope, adults must give children a chance to talk rather than avoid discussing the topic. Be honest and open. Children are fearful when they do not understand what is happening around them. Encourage children to express their feelings through speaking, drawing, or play. Provide them with comfort and repeated reassurance.

These are some steps that can help let children know that parents will take care of them:

- Get down to the child's eye level and talk to them. Provide simple, accurate information.
- Limit the child's media exposure including television and computers. When children see a traumatic event repetitively, they believe it is really happening again and again.
- Encourage the child to talk.
- Listen to your child and hear what she or he says. Acknowledge your child's feeling. For example, "It sounds like you are afraid that …" Do not say things to your child like, "You're a big boy now and shouldn't be scared."
- Do not expect your child to bounce back from a psychological trauma the way they may from a physical injury.
- Talk with your child about your own feelings. Be honest. "I felt afraid too, but we are together and we care about one another."
- Provide reassurance by saying, "We are together. We will take care of you."
- Involve your children by giving them age specific chores so they can be part of the recovery effort. Making them part of the family's disaster recovery effort can provide a sense of control and contribution. Keeping them involved in a safe way for example making sandwiches, or carrying water can make a child feel part of the family and the community. Families are strengthened when they pull together in adversity.
- Spend extra time with your child at bedtime. Leave a night-light on if that makes the child feel more secure. Allow the child to sleep with you for a while.
- Hug and hold your child. Close contact helps the child know that you are there for them and will take care of them.
- Peer support can help. Encourage your child, especially adolescents, to spend time with their friends when possible. Since adolescents do not always share with their parents, time with peers can allow them to relax and talk.
- Be patient. You may need to reassure your child repeatedly, saying the same thing over and over.
- If your young child lost a meaningful object like a toy or blanket allow the child to mourn and grieve. For a teen, the loss of a photo album or special certificates, awards, and irreplaceable memorabilia provoke feelings of sadness and anger. They, too, will need a chance to grieve their losses.
- If you or your children need help, contact a local mental health agency for assistance.

What School Communities Can Do to Help Children Cope

When a disaster strikes an entire community, school personnel can play a major part in the recovery and healing process for children. School administrators and teachers can lend support by giving students time to talk about the traumatic events and how they feel; not trying to rush back to school routines too quickly; holding meetings and counseling sessions for parents to discuss the events, their feelings and ways to help their children; offering art and play therapy for young children in school; holding in-school sessions with entire classes or individuals; and bringing mental health professionals into the school for these activities. The school can be a positive environment to bring families together during a time of adversity.

Early Intervention Is Important

When children suffer trauma from disasters or violence, early intervention is critical. Parents, professionals, and other adults need to provide comfort, stability, and support as soon as possible. It is important that children know you are there to take care of them. For more information call your local mental health provider or call **Mental Health America** at 1-800-969-NMHA (6642).

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