

Helping children recover from the emotional aftermath of a disaster

Children who experience a disaster are more likely than adults to be emotionally traumatized. But parents, teachers and caregivers can help prevent serious psychological consequences by observing, listening and talking to children.

Look for signs of distress:

Young Children.

Children who are preschool-age and younger may not have words to describe their experiences, but that does not mean they are unaware of the circumstances around them. Common signs of distress include:

- crying more than usual
- increased irritability
- changes in eating habits
- stomachaches and headaches
- fear of the dark
- bad dreams
- regressing to immature behaviors like bed-wetting and thumb- sucking

Some children may become noisy and hyperactive whereas others may become shy and cling to parents.

School-Age Children.

Children from about age six to 11 are better able to understand the consequences of a disaster. Because of this they are likely to feel sadness, anger and grief over losses. Some may fear that another disaster will occur or become so preoccupied by thoughts of the disaster that they have difficulty concentrating on schoolwork. A sudden drop in grades could indicate distress.

Like younger children, school-age children might experience physical symptoms, nightmares and childish behaviors.

Adolescents.

It is common for adolescents to experience intense emotions. Following a disaster, they may feel overwhelmed but be unable to talk about their feelings.

The adolescent years are normally a time when teenagers are interested in moving out into the world. Disasters can change that natural inclination, making the world seem dangerous and frightening. Instead of wanting to socialize, some adolescents may become afraid to leave home.

Others who feel they have lost control over their lives may begin to experiment with high-risk behaviors like:

- drinking

- drug abuse
- sexual activity
- reckless driving

Make time to listen to children:

- Give children opportunities to talk. It will help relieve their stress. Some children, particularly teenagers, may be reluctant to talk. Try getting them to open up while you are engaged in activities like chores, driving or recreation.
- Give children permission to feel and express their emotions. There is no such thing as a bad emotion. During times of disaster, it's normal to feel sad, angry and afraid.
- If children have difficulty talking about their experiences, encourage them to draw pictures, tell stories or play make-believe games. It will help them express their feelings and give adults an understanding of what they are experiencing.

Talk to children during disasters:

- Tell children the truth about a disaster but make sure the amount and kind of information you tell them is age- appropriate.
- Reassure children that adults are doing everything possible to keep families safe. Explain what emergency responders and relief workers are doing to help. Putting the focus on good deeds rather than the disaster will help create positive outlooks.
- Talk to children about your family's faith traditions. Spiritual beliefs and practices can increase well-being during times of crisis.

Other actions that will help children cope:

- Keep daily routines intact as much as possible. Routines will offer a sense of stability in times of uncertainty.
- Practice your Family Disaster Plan. If you do not have one, now is a good time to start one. Talk with all members of the family about a plan and give each member a responsibility.
- Limit children's exposure to violent media such as video games, TV programs and even news reports about the disaster.

Don't forget to take care of yourself. It will help you take good care of your children. And be conscious of how you react in a crisis because children will be looking to you for clues on how they should react and cope. If you, or your child, are experiencing trauma or high levels of distress, seek crisis counseling. Early intervention can help prevent worse problems in the future. To find out about crisis counseling services in your area, contact the nearest Local Mental Health Authority.