

Helping Your Child Cope with Disaster



General

It is normal for children to be afraid, especially after a natural disaster. The fear may last for an extended period of time and is best handled with kindness and understanding on the part of the parents. Children should be encouraged to talk about their feelings and express their fears through play, drawing, painting, or clay/playdough.

Research indicates that children's fears vary according to age, maturation, and previous learning experiences. Four major fears common in children are: death, darkness, animals, and abandonment.

Another important aspect of children's fears is that they may be intensified when adults refuse or are reluctant to discuss them with children. Many families ban all painful topics from family conversation. Such strategies inflict high costs in terms of intensified despair and negativity among children. To help children cope with fears, one of the most important steps adults can take is to take the time to talk with children.

Following a Disaster Some Children May:

- be upset at the loss of a favorite toy, blanket, teddy bear, etc.
- be angry. They may hit, throw, kick to show their anger.
- become more active and restless.
- be afraid of the disaster recurring. They may ask many times, "Will it come again?"
- be afraid to be left alone or afraid to sleep

alone. Children may want to sleep with a parent or another person. They may have nightmares.

- behave as they did when younger. They may start sucking their thumb, wetting the bed, asking for a bottle, wanting to be held.
- have symptoms of illness such as nausea, vomiting, headaches, not wanting to eat, running a fever.
- be quiet and withdrawn, not wanting to talk about the experience. become upset easily -crying and whining frequently.
- feel guilty that they caused the disaster because of some previous behavior.
- feel neglected by parents who are busy trying to clean up and rebuild their lives and homes.
- refuse to go to school or to child care arrangements. The child may not want to be out of the parent's sight.
- become afraid of loud noises, rain, storms.
- not show any outward sign of being upset. Some children may never show distress because they do not feel upset. Other children may not give evidence of being upset until several weeks or months later.

What Parents Can Do To Help Children Cope with Feelings

- Talk with your child, providing simple, accurate information to questions.
- Talk with your child about your own feelings.

- Listen to what your child says and how your child says it. Is there fear, anxiety, insecurity? Repeating the child's words may be very helpful, such as "You are afraid that...", or "You wonder if the storm will come again tonight." This helps both you and the child clarify feelings.
- Reassure your child, "We are together. We care about you. We will take care of you."
- You may need to repeat information and reassurances many times. Do not stop responding just because you told the child once or even 10 times.
- Hold your child. Provide comfort. Touching is important for children during this period. Close contact helps assure children that you are there and will not abandon them.
- Spend extra time putting your child to bed. Talk and offer assurance. Leave a night light on if that makes the child feel more secure.
- Observe your child at play. Listen to what is said and how the child plays. Frequently children express feelings of fear or anger while playing with dolls, trucks, or friends after a major disaster.
- Provide play experiences to relieve tension. Work with playdough, paint, play in water, etc. If children show a need to hit or kick, give them something safe like a pillow, ball, or balloon. Allow a safe, open space for them to play if possible.
- If your child lost a meaningful toy or blanket, allow the child to mourn and grieve (by crying, perhaps). It is all part of helping the young child cope with feelings about the disaster. In time, it may be helpful to replace the lost object.
- If you need help for your child, contact your Extension office, mental health agency, or a clergy member.

Publication Number 490-309, August 1996

Based on information developed by Clemson Cooperative Extension following Hurricane Hugo. Revised for Virginia audiences by Virginia Cooperative Extension.

For more information, contact your local office of Virginia Cooperative Extension.