After the storm: normal fears or signs of trauma?

In the wake of Superstorm Sandy, children may be exhibiting signs of trauma. Experts offer ways to help them cope and readjust to life following disaster.

by: *Jessica Kelmon (https://www.greatschools.org/gk/author/jkelmon/)* | *February 12, 2016*

Watching the waters rise and overtake their living room, seeing tree-crushed cars and power lines down, or bearing witness to much worse — with the added stress of their parents' sheer panic — are just a few things many a child experienced as part of Superstorm Sandy. Now, whether your child experienced destruction and flooding or was terrified by the news from afar, you may be wondering about the emotional toll on your child. Nightmares, fear of rain and wind, bedwetting, obsession with the news, disturbing play themes, not eating, completely off-kilter routines — these behaviors may have you wondering if your child has been traumatized by Sandy, and whether your child's physical and emotional reactions are normal or signs of more worrisome trauma.

In truth, it's not really an either/or situation. Wendy Smith, an expert on disaster mental health and child development and professor at the USC School of Social Work, says the storm constitutes a trauma for many kids that experienced Sandy up close — and for some who experienced it remotely. The normal and healthy response, then, is for your child to display some signs of trauma, including fear and grief.

"This is huge," says Smith. "There's going to be grief... if [your child] experienced water in your house — that's frightening. Even if [your child] saw their parents frightened, that is frightening."

Whether your family has lost a home or simply spent the last week glued to the television, she says, your child may exhibit signs of trauma.

Common signs of trauma in children

"I think many, if not most, children following a disaster will show more clinginess," Smith says, "and more desire to be around adults." This may mean separation of any kind is a little tougher — even bedtime. Temporary regression – like a recently potty-trained toddler having more accidents, a young school-aged child feeling less comfortable returning to school, or a teen not wanting to leave the house — is normal, she adds. Changes in behavior — from becoming more active, aggressive, or angry to withdrawing, having trouble concentrating, or losing interest in things they normally love — can be signs of distress.

In school, look for changes in academic performance. You may notice a preoccupation with the hurricane, such as talking about it incessantly or with younger children, playing "hurricane" in imaginative games. After a trauma, adolescents are more likely to engage

in high-risk behavior (e.g. smoking, drinking, driving fast). In children of any age, parents might see changes in appetite and an increased sensitivity to sound — reminiscent of thunder, wind, and other loud noises (like trees and power lines falling).

Helping kids feel safe again

Because this disaster may be children's first glimpse of their parents' fears and vulnerability, Smith stresses that parents need to take care of themselves — eating, sleeping, getting medical care, and finding another adult you can vent your own fears and frustrations to. By taking care of themselves, says Smith, parents can get a hold of their own emotions enough to model calm behavior, a strategy that is particularly effective with traumatized kids. Next, acknowledge the facts to help children regain their sense of safety. "Parents can say, 'That was really scary, but we're fine now,'" Smith says.

Next, reestablish normal routines to nurture your children's sense that they are not powerless. The Red Cross recommends getting back on a regular schedule vis-à-vis meals, bedtime, school (if it's open), and play. To build your child's sense of fortitude, involve them in revamping your family's safety plan or pulling together a disaster supplies kit. Talk to family members and friends for some good, old-fashioned socializing. Use the media to stay informed, but try to minimize your child's exposure to images of doom and gloom — especially for younger kids who may mistake repeated images as bad things happening again and again.

And in the end, Smith says, don't underestimate the power of communication. Be ready to answer lots of questions, as well as the same question over and over. You can ask them to draw pictures, tell a story, or write in a journal about what happened to help them process their feelings. By encouraging kids to sort through their thoughts, you're subtly letting them know it's okay to talk about their worries. That said, try to end each conversation on a reassuring note, be it reiterating that you're safe, reviewing your safety plan, or simply conveying a positive outlook.

Emotional intelligence (https://www.greatschools.org/gk/tag/emotional-intelligence/)

About the author

Jessica Kelmon (https://www.greatschools.org/gk/author/jkelmon/)

Jessica Kelmon is the Managing Editor for GreatSchools.org. She has been covering parenting issues, children's health and development, education, and social-emotional learning for more than a decade. She earned her Masters in Journalism from Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism.

Empowering parents

GreatSchools is the leading national nonprofit empowering parents to unlock educational opportunities for their children. We provide school information and parenting resources to help millions of American families choose the right school, support learning at home, and guide their children to great futures.

Support GreatSchools in this effort! Donate Now! (https://www.classy.org/checkout/donation?eid=147615)

Join us

- Supporters (/gk/supporters/)
- Licensing (/gk/licensing/)
- Sponsorship (/gk/sponsorship/)
- Advertising (/gk/advertising/)
- Careers (/gk/careers/)

Learn more

- Newsletter
- Privacy policy (/gk/privacy/)
- Terms of use (/gk/terms/)
- About us (/gk/about/)
- Contact us (/gk/contact/)

Connect

- Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/greatschools)
- Twitter (https://www.twitter.com/greatschools)
- Pinterest (https://pinterest.com/greatschools/)
- YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/greatschools)
- Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/greatschools/)