



Disaster: Helping Children Cope

A Handout for Parents

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Background

Disasters can take many forms. They may weather-related, as in tornadoes, hurricanes, or floods; accident-related, as in bus or automobile deaths or drowning; illness-related as in AIDS, cancer or other deaths due to illness; or bizarre and unusual, as in the case of snipers or a murder.

The emotional effects of a disaster on you and your child can be tremendous. One of the difficulties experienced by parents during disasters is that they have not had adequate time to deal with their own reactions when they are called upon to deal with the impact of the disaster on their child. This handout is designed to help you and your child during a disaster.

Reactions to Disaster

Common emotional reactions: Emotional reactions vary in nature and severity from child to child. Children's reactions to a disaster are determined by their previous experiences, their temperament and personality, and the immediacy of the disaster to their own lives. Nonetheless, some commonalities exist in how children (and adults) feel when their lives are disrupted by a disaster.

- *Loss of Control:* By their very nature, disasters are something over which we have no control — if we did, we would stop them from happening. The feeling of loss of control can be overwhelming.
- *Loss of Stability:* Disasters also interrupt the natural order of things. Stability is gone and this is very threatening; it can destroy trust and upset equilibrium for extended periods. After all, if this disaster could happen, then most anything else might happen too.
- *Self-centered Reactions:* Children's immediate reaction to disaster often includes a fear for their own safety. They may be intensely worried about what will happen to them, to an extent that you think is unreasonable. However, young children have difficulty putting the needs of others before their own. Children need repeated reassurance regarding their own safety and the outcome of the disaster as it relates to them.

Stages of reactions to loss: Some reactions to disasters are similar to reactions to other losses or grief. These include denial, anger, depression, bargaining and acceptance. Not every person experiences all of these feelings, and they do not always occur in just this order. A person may feel angry, then depressed, then angry again. How feelings are expressed will vary with the age of the child. A very young child may express denial by refusing to talk about the situation or clowning when others are talking about the disaster. Older children may go to their rooms or insist on going to the mall. Anger in a young child may involve a tantrum and in older child may be manifested as yelling at a parent.

Common stress symptoms: Following a disaster or traumatic crisis event, children — like adults — will likely exhibit at least several typical symptoms of stress, reflecting their emotional reactions and sense of loss. Symptoms tend to vary with the age and developmental maturity of the child. If symptoms persist for a long time or seem extreme, parents should seek professional help through the school or community healthcare provider. At different ages, parents can expect:

- *Preschoolers:* thumbsucking, bedwetting, clinging to parents, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, fear of the dark, regression in toileting habits

- *Elementary school children:* irritability, aggressiveness, clinginess, nightmares, school avoidance, poor concentration, withdrawal from activities and friends, increased conflict with siblings
- *Young adolescents:* sleep disturbance, loss of appetite, poor school performance, physical complaints (headache, stomachache), conflict with parents, withdrawal from friends
- *Older adolescents:* sleeping and eating disturbances, agitation, lack of energy, lessened interest in peers, physical complaints (headache, stomachache), poor concentration, irresponsible or delinquent behavior

Supporting Children During or After a Disaster

Knowing what to say is often difficult. When no other words come to mind, a hug and saying, "This is really hard for us," will always work.

- *Try to recognize the feeling underlying your child's actions* and put it into words. Saying something like "It makes us mad to think about all the people and homes that were hurt by this hurricane," or "I can see you are feeling really sad about this," can help.
- Sometimes children may have an overwhelming fear that they are *unable to put into words*, and you may need to voice for them. For instance, if a friend loses his mother during a flood, you might want to say to your child, "You may be scared that something will happen to me and Daddy (or Mommy) too. We are safe, and the flood waters are leaving, so we aren't going to die from this flood."
- *Be honest* with your child about what has happened and what is happening.
- *Don't deny the seriousness of the situation.* Saying to a child "Don't cry, everything will be okay" does not reflect how the child feels and the child knows that, at least in the immediate future, this is not true.
- *Help your child know what words to use with others.* For instance, if the disaster has resulted in death, the child may feel overwhelmed about what to say to friends at the funeral home. You may need to help by suggesting some simple appropriate words.
- *Plan a practical concrete activity* to help children deal with feelings.
- *Involve children in decisions* about what to do to help restore their sense of having control in their lives. Possible activities include:
 - Collecting money for disaster victims.
 - Planting a tree as a memorial for a death.
 - Designing cards and writing notes to someone involved in the disaster.
 - Drawing pictures and putting up a bulletin board.
 - Writing poems or stories for a class book about the disaster.
- *Inform your children's teachers* about how they are reacting and find out what is being done in the classroom to deal with the disaster.
- *Decide how to handle attending funeral or memorial services* if the disaster involves deaths. Whenever possible, parents should take their own children to services. Provide information about the funeral and its structure to prepare children for the experience. Children who aren't going may still want to know what will happen. For young children, this may be their first experience with death, and information may be especially important for them.
- *Allow for the fatigue* which children may experience due to stress and changed sleep patterns.

Long-term Reactions

Prepare for long-term reactions which are normal, such as the continued need to discuss a hurricane or shooting.

Be alert for pathological long-term reactions, which are more severe than those experienced by most children. These might include (1) persistent reexperiencing of the traumatic event through intense recollections, dreams, flashbacks or hallucinations, (2) persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma or numbing of responsiveness — restricted affect, diminished interest in usual activities or (3) signs of increased arousal, such as sleep difficulties, irritability, hypervigilance, disturbances in concentration, or exaggerated startle response.

Find ways to emphasize a return to stability. When the disaster abates, return to previous schedules and maintain these for a time, even if some change in routine was planned, in order to provide a sense of security and comfort.

Resources

Brooks, B. & Seigel, P. (1996). *The scared child: Helping kids overcome traumatic events*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Martin, M. & Waltman-Greenwood, C. (1995). *Solve your child's school-related problems* (Appendix B: Helping your child through crisis at home and at school). New York: HarperPerennial.

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