



Young Children and Disasters

Disasters and trauma

After experiencing a disaster—whether it is a flood, earthquake, fire, or human caused event, children may react in ways that are difficult to understand. Even if children are not physically injured, the emotional response can be strong. They may act clingy, irritable or distant, and although they are very young and do not seem to understand what is going on, they are affected as much as adults. Adult fears and anxieties are communicated to children in many ways. The experience is more difficult for them, as they do not understand the connection between the disaster and all the upheaval that follows. They need reassurance that everything is all right.

There is a wide range of “normal” reactions for children following a disaster, most of which can be handled with extra support at home, child care and school. In some cases, professional intervention may be needed, despite everyone’s best efforts. Early intervention can help a child avoid more severe problems.

Message to parents

Some ways to provide reassurance after a disaster are:

- Try to remain calm.
- Remember the effect and anxiety produced by watching television coverage or listening to the radio. Keep TV/radio/adult conversations about the disaster at a minimum around young children.
- Spend extra time being close to your child(ren).
- Answer all questions as honestly and simply as possible. Be prepared to answer the same questions over and over. Children need reassurance to master their fears.
- Spend extra time with your child at bedtime—soothing and relaxing time—talking, reading or singing quietly.
- Spend extra time with your child when bringing them to child care—they may be afraid you will not come back.
- Try to return to a normal routine as soon as possible to restore a sense of normalcy and security.

- Don’t promise there won’t be another disaster. Instead, encourage children to talk about their fears and what they can do to help in case of disaster. Tell them you will do everything you can to keep them safe.
- Be patient and understanding if your child is having difficulties.
- Never use threats. Saying, “If you don’t behave an earthquake will swallow you up,” will only add to the fear and not help your child behave more acceptably.
- Consider how you and your child can help. Children are better able to regain their sense of security if they can help in some way.
- Share your concerns with your child’s teacher or child care provider. Consider assistance from professionals trained to work with disaster victims.

Message to child care providers

You can be a support and resource to parents by helping them understand behavioral and emotional responses. Be sensitive to how parents feel when they are separated from their children in a disaster. It may be very helpful for parents, children and you to take some extra time when dropping off children in the morning. A group meeting to reassure parents, discuss your response to their children’s reactions, and review your emergency plan will help everyone feel more secure.

Help children cope by reenacting how the disaster felt and talking about their fears so they can master them. Talk about being afraid, and practice what you will do the next time a disaster strikes. Because young children think the world revolves around them, children may need reassurance that they did not cause the disaster.

Consider referring a family for professional help if any of the behaviors on the following page persists two to four weeks after the disaster. Children who have lost family members or friends, or who were physically injured or felt they were in life-threatening danger, are at special risk for emotional disturbance. Children who have been in previous disasters or who are involved in a family crisis may also have more difficulty coping.

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Typical Reactions of Children Following Disaster

Children Ages 1 to 5

Children in this age group are particularly vulnerable to changes in their routines and disruption of their environments. Dependent on family members for comfort, they may be affected as much by the reactions of family members as by the disaster. Focus on reestablishing comforting routines, providing opportunity for nonverbal and verbal expression of feelings, and reassurance.

Regressive Reactions	Emotional/Behavioral Reactions	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bedwetting • Thumbsucking • Fear of darkness • Fear of animals • Fear of “monsters” • Fear of strangers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nervousness • Irritability • Uncooperative • Hyperactivity • Tics • Speech difficulties • Anxiety about separation from parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shorter attention span • Aggressive behavior • Exaggeration or distortion of disaster experience • Repetitive talking about experiences • Exaggeration of behavior problems
Physiological Reactions	How to Help	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of appetite • Overeating • Indigestion • Vomiting • Bowel or bladder problems • Sleep disorders and nightmares 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give additional verbal assurance and ample physical comforting. • Provide comforting bedtime routines. • Permit the child to sleep in the parents’ room on a temporary basis. • Encourage expression of emotions through play activities including drawing, dramatic play, or telling stories about the experience. • Resume normal routines as soon as possible. 	

Children Ages 5 to 11

Regressive behaviors are especially common in this age group. Children may become more withdrawn or more aggressive. They might be particularly affected by the loss of prized objects or pets. Encourage verbalization and play enactment of their experiences. While routines might be temporarily relaxed, the goal should be to resume normal routines as soon possible.

Regressive Reactions	Emotional/Behavioral Reactions	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased competition with younger siblings • Excessive clinging • Crying or whimpering • Wanting to be fed or dressed • Engaging in habits they had previously given up 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School phobia • Withdrawal from play group and friends • Withdrawal from family contacts • Irritability • Uncooperative • Fear of wind, rain, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inability to concentrate and drop in level of school achievement • Aggressive behavior • Repetitive talking about their experiences • Sadness over losses • Overreaction to crises or changes in the environment
Physiological Reactions	How to Help	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headaches • Complaints of visual or hearing problems • Persistent itching and scratching • Nausea • Sleep disturbance, nightmares, night terrors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give additional attention and ample physical comforting. • Insist gently but firmly that the child accept more responsibility than younger siblings; positively reinforce age-appropriate behavior. • Reduce pressure on the child to perform at his or her best in school and while doing chores at home. • Reassure the child that his competence will return. • Provide structured but not demanding chores and responsibilities. • Encourage physical activity. • Encourage verbal and written expression of thoughts and feelings about the disaster; encourage the child to grieve the loss of pets or toys. • Schedule play sessions with adults and peers. 	