

Helping Children During & After a Disaster

Effectively parenting during and after a natural disaster is possible! When all else seems outside of your control, helping children navigate big emotions, questions, and worries is one way you can positively manage the situation. Children (even the older ones!) are seeking information, comfort, and help. Responding to their needs and worries in a healthy way will help them deal with the complex emotions associated with this traumatic experience.

Common Reactions. These generally decrease with time. Seek professional help if children have difficulties *for more than six weeks* afterwards.

1. Feelings of anxiety, fear, and worry about safety of self and others (including pets)
2. Young children may become more clingy to loved ones, caregivers, teachers
3. Distress and anxiety with reminders of disaster (e.g., rushing water, burning smell, sounds of sirens or helicopters, flooded or burnt landscape and buildings)
4. Behavior changes:
 - Angry outbursts
 - Increased irritability
 - Increased activity level
 - Withdrawal from typical activities
 - Decreased concentration and attention
5. Overly focused on the disaster:
 - Repeatedly talking about it
 - Asking the same (or similar) questions over and over
 - Young children may pretend “play” the event
 - Use the event as the central feature in play interactions or drawings
6. Sleep changes
7. Appetite / eating changes
8. Lack of interest in usual activities, including interest in playing with friends
 - Changes in school performance
 - Regressive behaviors in young children (e.g., baby talk, bedwetting, tantrums)
 - Increased likelihood of adolescent risky behaviors (e.g., drinking, drugs, self injury)

Information adapted from National Child Traumatic Stress Network, www.NCTSN.org.

For other questions or more information, contact Dr. Sedges hsedges@utk.edu or 865-974-719

Focus on the 3 C's during a disaster

1. **Consistency** (or as much as possible)

- a. **Maintain rituals & routines.** Even in the mist of chaos and change, children feel more safe and secure with structure and routine. As much as possible, stick to (or integrate portions of) daily rituals and routines.
- b. **Maintain expectations.** Keep family rules, like good behavior & respect for others.
- c. **Bedtime support.** Children may become anxious when they separate from parents, caregivers, or siblings- particularly at bedtime. First try to spend more time with your child at bedtime with such activities as reading a book. It's okay to make a temporary arrangement for young children to sleep near you, but with the understanding that they will go back to normal sleeping arrangements at a set future date.

| | Routines | Rituals |
|----------|---|---|
| Purpose | Provide structure and stability | Help achieve desired outcomes |
| Intent | Often performed without much thought | Mindful and meaningful |
| Feelings | Help us feel in control of our time | Help us feel good about ourselves or create a sense of connection with others |
| Examples | Making your bed, brushing your teeth, completing chores | Winking at your child, singing good-night songs, having a family dinner |

2. **Conversation**

- a. **Spend time talking with your child.** This will let your child know that it is OK to ask questions and to express their concerns. Children may have questions on more than one occasion. Remain flexible and open to answering repeated and new questions.
- b. **Answer questions briefly and honestly.** Follow conversations with a favorite story or activity.
- c. **Talk about community response and recovery.** Reassure children about the work being done in their community to save and protect people, homes, livestock, pets, and wildlife. Explain services that have been activated, highlighting what they're seeing for themselves, like utility restoration, debris removal, or housing assistance. Assure them that communities are comprised of groups with certain jobs and tasks specifically for situations like this. Note that they are not going to need to "solve" anything alone.
- d. **Monitor adult conversations.** Be aware of what is being said during adult conversations. Children may misinterpret what they hear and can be frightened unnecessarily about something they do not understand.

3. **Confidence**

- a. **Model.** Children take cues of how to handle situations from familiar adults. Modeling calm behaviors (& caring for yourself) is important during chaotic times and reassures children.
- b. **Reassure children that they are safe or the plans you have for their safety.** This may need to be repeated many times during and after the event. You should spend extra time with your children and stay connected. It doesn't matter whether it's playing games, reading together, or just cuddling. Be sure to tell children they are loved.
- c. **Be patient.** Children may need extra patience and attention. They may need reminders or extra help with chores or homework, as they may be more distracted. Be confident that this level of support is not permanent.