

A Parent's Guide to Helping Children Deal With Disasters

Children's reactions to disasters:

Children often will experience physical and behavioral symptoms to a traumatic event, such as: clingy behavior, crying, whining, withdrawing, sleep changes, nightmares, eating changes – more or less food, worrisome questions, compulsive behaviors (such as: checking out the window, rocking, compulsive masturbation), complaining of stomach aches and headaches.

What a parent can do:

- 1. Establish consistency as soon as possible. A regular bedtime, eating meals together, reading stories, bath time, etc. Rituals bring a sense of safety a child needs after a scary event. As much of his should be done, even if the family is in a shelter or staying with family.**
- 2. A parent needs to tell the truth. Give the child as much information as they are asking from you. Consider your child's age when knowing how to explain the event. Young children do not think abstractly. Speak in concrete terms: "Death is what happens when your lungs don't breath anymore, your heart doesn't pump anymore..."**
- 3. Do not combine concepts, such as death and sleep: "He went to sleep." (A child might become afraid that if you go to sleep, you are going to die too).**
- 4. Remind the child in ways that you will help keep them safe, but don't make promises you cannot keep.**
- 5. Since children often regress to an earlier stage of development, three and four years may want a bottle again, children usually want to be close, held, stroked and having stories read to them. Children often go through a period of sucking their fingers when anxious.**
- 6. Limit the amount of time children watch TV, particularly unattended. After a disaster, there are often breaking news reports and repeated showings of the disaster. Children may not understand that an event isn't happening again when they watch reruns of news coverage.**
- 7. When children repeatedly ask questions, answer them consistently and ask them what they think. Children usually know and understand more than adults give them credit for.**
- 8. Don't diminish the concern your child expresses.**
- 9. Don't assume your children are not overhearing your conversations – even if they appear asleep. You may wish to discuss your own worries with other adults, or be aware your child may be listening.**
- 10. Provide your child with something with meaning: like a bracelet, a necklace, a scarf or laminated picture of the family (particularly if there was a death of a loved one).**
- 11. Make sure your child has comfort toys, such as a teddy bear, special blanket or pillow.**
- 12. Some children become aggressive when they are frightened. Make special time to do something very physical: playing ball, running, jumping rope or playing games. Exercise helps burn off stress chemicals that build in the body.**
- 13. Some children become very passive when they are frightened. In order to help empower them, engage them in physical activity: exercise, play, building something, hitting a ball, etc. The activity helps them to breathe (some children hold their breath when scared) and decreases the sense of helplessness.**

14. **Get information from local organizations (such as American Red Cross and more) about activities available for children (and adults) after such a disaster.**
15. **Allow children to help. Children that help out, fare better than children that don't. Helping helps to combat learned helplessness. Collecting money (with supervision), gathering toys to give to other children, writing letters or drawing pictures, sweeping or whatever might be appropriate clean up for the type of disaster experienced. These activities can also teach your child empathy for others.**
16. **Allow your children to cry. Tears that are cried are made up of different chemicals than tears that we blink, so crying tears release stress chemicals in the body causing a stress release. Let your child see you cry or let them know you cry too.**
17. **Avoid using drugs and alcohol to handle your emotions. Your child is watching the way you handle extraordinary situations.**
18. **Reassure your child of the rarity of the event (if this is true).**
19. **Encourage your child to write (if old enough) or draw. Many crisis agencies have things children can color that deal with the event. Check out the American Red Cross website for online coloring books that can be downloaded.**
20. **Provide children with their own flashlight.**
21. **Don't assume that your child is fine simply because s/he has not expressed their thoughts or feelings. Ask. Let the child know that people respond in many different ways when scary things happen and they you are there to help.**
22. **Temporarily lower your expectations of performance around school, sports and other activities the child may be involved in. Have a discussion with the teacher about what the child experienced.**
23. **Make a joint scrapbook that holds positive memories together. If the natural disaster destroyed family pictures, have the child (or you) draw some of those memories or make collages.**
24. **Encourage the child to listen to favorite music, to read (or be read to) favorite stories or physical activities. Go for a walk or play a game together. Exercise helps to burn off the stress chemicals (for both of you).**
25. **If there were deaths of people or pets they child knew, allow them to be a part of the rituals of loss – and prepare them ahead of time for what it will be like. Normalize the event.**
26. **Seek out appropriate children's books to assist in a discussion about the trauma. A professional can assist you with finding one that is age-appropriate.**