

DISASTER RESOURCE



Cooperative Extension Service
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Helping You Put Knowledge to Work

Helping Your Child Cope With a Disaster

It is normal for children to be afraid, especially with the uncertainty of a natural disaster like a flood, tornado or earthquake. The fear may last for an extended period of time and is best dealt with by kindness and understanding on the part of the parents. Children should be encouraged to talk about their feelings and otherwise express their fears through play, drawing, painting or clay/playdough. Research indicates that children's fears vary according to age, maturation and previous learning experiences. Four major fears common in children are: death, darkness, animals and abandonment. During a disaster, children could have encountered several of these fears. To help children cope with fears, one of the most important steps adults can take is to talk with children.

Following a disaster, some children may:

- Be upset at the loss of a favorite toy, blanket, teddy bear, etc.
- Be angry. They may hit, throw or kick to show their anger.
- Become more active and restless.
- Be afraid of the disaster recurring.
- Be afraid to be left alone or afraid to sleep alone. Children may want to sleep with a parent or another person. They may have nightmares.
- Behave as they did when younger. They may start sucking their thumb, wetting the bed, asking for a bottle, wanting to be held.
- Have symptoms of illness such as nausea, vomiting, headaches, fever or not wanting to eat.
- Be quiet and withdrawn, not wanting to talk about the experience.
- Become upset easily — crying and whining frequently.
- Feel guilty that they caused the disaster because of some previous behavior.
- Feel neglected by parents who are busy trying to clean up and rebuild their lives/homes.
- Refuse to go to school or their childcare provider. The child may not want to be out of the parent's sight.

- Become afraid of loud noises, rain or storms, or other reminders of the disaster.

- Not show any outward sign of being upset. Some children may never show distress because they do not feel upset. Other children may not give evidence of being upset until several weeks or months later.

What parents can do to help their children cope:

- Talk with your child, providing simple, accurate answers to their questions.
- Talk honestly with your child about your own feelings.
- Listen to what your child says and how your child says it. Is there fear, anxiety or insecurity? Repeating the child's words may be very helpful, such as "You are afraid that..." or "You wonder if the flood will come again tonight." This helps both you and the child clarify feelings.
- Reassure your child, "We are together. We care about you. We will take care of you."
- You may need to repeat information and reassurances many times. Do not stop responding just because you told the child once or even a dozen times.
- Hold your child. Provide comfort. Touching is important for children during this period. Close contact helps assure children that you are there for them and will not abandon them.
- Spend extra time putting your child to bed. Talk and offer assurance. Leave a night light on if that makes the child feel more secure.
- Observe your child at play. Listen to what is said and how the child plays. Frequently children express feelings of fear or anger while playing with dolls, trucks or friends after a major disaster.
- Provide play experiences to relieve tension. Work with playdough, paint, blocks, etc. If children show a need to hit or kick, give them something safe like a pillow, ball or balloon. Allow a safe, open space for them to play if possible.

- If your child lost a meaningful toy or blanket, allow the child to mourn and grieve (by crying, perhaps). It is all part of helping the young child cope with feelings about the disaster. In time, it may be helpful to replace the lost object.

- Remember that children's fears may be intensified when adults avoid discussing the topic with children. Many families ban all painful topics from family conversation. To help children cope with fears, one of the most important steps adults can take is to share and make time to talk with children.

- If you need help for your child, contact a community resource such as your local Cooperative Extension Service office, mental health agency, Farm Resource Center Crisis Line or a minister. In Illinois, the phone number for the Farm Resource Center Crisis Line is 800-851-4719.

*This information was developed by Clemson University Extension
September, 1989*

*Reviewed by Aaron Ebata, Extension Specialist, University of Illinois.
January, 1995*

Copyright © 1995 by University of Illinois Board of Trustees.

You have reached the end of this publication.
If you would like to review the document, click
on the ◀, ◀◀, or ◀◀◀ buttons.

To return to the main list of publication categories, click on the button to the right.

**publication
categories**

3