

# Helping Children Cope with Disaster



**FEMA**



**American  
Red Cross**

*Together, we can save a life*





**This booklet offers parents, caregivers,  
and other adults suggestions on how  
to help children cope with the effects of  
disaster, as well as how to be prepared  
before a disaster strikes.**



# Helping Children Cope with Disaster

Children can feel very frightened during a disaster and afterwards some children will show temporary changes of behavior.

For most children these changes will be mild, not last long, and diminish with time. However, reminders of what happened could cause upsetting feelings to return and behavior changes to emerge again. Watching scenes of the disaster on television can be distressing for children, especially for younger children.

Younger children may return to bed-wetting, have difficulty sleeping, and not want to be separated from their caregivers. Older children may show more anger than usual, find concentrating at school harder, and want to spend more time alone than usual.

Some children are more vulnerable, and their reactions can be more severe and last for a longer period of time.

Factors that contribute to greater vulnerability include:

- ◆ **Direct exposure to the disaster**

This includes being evacuated, seeing injured or dying people, being injured themselves, and feeling that their own lives are threatened.

- ◆ **Personal loss**

This includes the death or serious injury of a family member, close friend, or family pet.

- ◆ **On-going stress from the secondary effects of disaster**

This includes temporarily living elsewhere, losing contact with their friends and neighbors, losing things that are important to them, parental job loss, and the financial costs of reestablishing their previous living conditions.

- ◆ **Prior exposure to disaster or other traumatic event.**

How parents and caregivers react to and cope with a disaster or emergency situation can affect the way their children react. When parents and caregivers or other family members are able to deal with the situation calmly and confidently, they are often the best source of support for their children. One way to help children feel more confident and in control is to involve them in preparing a family disaster plan (refer to page 7).

## **CHILDREN'S REACTION TO DISASTER**

The following are common reactions that children may exhibit following a disaster. While the following descriptions are typical, some children may exhibit none of these behaviors and others may behave in ways not mentioned here.



### **BIRTH THROUGH 6 YEARS**

Although infants may not have words to describe their experiences, they can retain memories. They may react by being more irritable, crying more than usual, or wanting to be held and cuddled more. Preschool and kindergarten children can feel helpless, powerless, and frightened about being separated from their caregivers.

### **7 THROUGH 10 YEARS**

Older children can understand the permanence of loss. They may become preoccupied with the details of the traumatic event and want to talk about it continually. This preoccupation can interfere with their concentration at school and affect their academic performance. Children may hear inaccurate information from their peers which parents can clarify. They may fear that the disaster will happen again and have sad or angry feelings.





## **11 THROUGH 18 YEARS**

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As children mature, their responses become more similar to those of adults. Much of adolescence is focused on moving out into the world. Following a disaster, that world can seem more dangerous and unsafe. Teenagers may react by becoming involved in dangerous, risk-taking behaviors, such as reckless driving, and alcohol or drug use. Others may become fearful of leaving home and avoid social activity.

Teenagers can feel overwhelmed by their intense emotions, yet unable to talk about them.

## **WHAT PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS CAN DO**

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It is important for parents and other caregivers to understand what is causing a child's anxieties and fears. Following a disaster, children are most afraid that:

- ◆ The event will happen again.
- ◆ Someone close to them will be killed or injured.
- ◆ They will be left alone or separated from their family.

Parents and caregivers can clarify misunderstandings of risk and danger by acknowledging children's concerns and perceptions. Discussions of preparedness plans can strengthen a child's sense of safety and security.

Listen to what a child is saying. If a young child asks questions about the event, answer them simply without the elaboration needed for an older child or adult. Children vary in the amount of information they need



and can use. If a child has difficulty expressing his or her thoughts and feelings, then allowing them to draw a picture or tell a story of what happened may help.



### Parents and Caregivers Can Take the Following Actions:

- ◆ Encourage your children to talk and listen to their concerns.
- ◆ Calmly provide factual information about the disaster and plans for insuring their ongoing safety.
- ◆ Involve your children in updating your family disaster plan and disaster supplies kit (refer to pages 7-9)
- ◆ Practice your plan.
- ◆ Involve your children by giving them specific tasks to let them know they can help restore family and community life.
- ◆ Spend extra time with your children.
- ◆ Re-establish daily routines for work, school, play, meals, and rest.

## MONITOR AND LIMIT YOUR FAMILY'S EXPOSURE TO THE MEDIA

News coverage of the disaster can cause fear, confusion and anxiety in children. This is particularly true for a large-scale disaster or terrorist event, in which significant property damage and loss of life has occurred. Especially for younger children, repeatedly watching images of an event can cause them to believe the event is occurring again and again.

Parents and caregivers should be available to encourage communication and provide explanations when children are permitted to watch television or use the Internet if images or news about the disaster are being shown.

Parents can also limit their own exposure to anxiety-provoking information.



## Use Support Networks

Parents and caregivers can best help children when they understand their own feelings and have developed ways of coping themselves. One way of doing this is to build and use social support systems of family, friends, community organizations, faith-based institutions or other resources. In the event a disaster strikes, they can call on these support systems to help them manage their reactions. In turn, parents and caregivers are more available and better able to support their children.



If a child continues to be very upset by what happened or if reactions interfere with their school work or their relationships at home or with their friends, it may be appropriate to talk with the child's primary care physician or a mental health provider who specializes in children's needs.

## **PREPARE YOUR FAMILY**

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Preparing for disaster helps everyone in the family accept the fact that disasters do happen, and that they can do something about it. Families should work together to identify and collect the resources needed to meet basic needs during and after disaster. When people feel prepared, they cope better.

*Take the following actions with your family to get prepared:*

### **Get Informed**

- ◆ Call your local emergency management office or local American Red Cross chapter and ask about the specific hazards in your community and about your risk to those hazards. Also learn about community response plans, evacuation plans and routes, community warning systems, and nearby buildings that are designated as disaster shelters.
- ◆ Learn about the emergency plans and procedures that exist in places you and your family spend time. Priority locations include places of employment, schools, and childcare centers.

### **Create a Family Disaster Plan**

- ◆ Discuss with your family the hazards that could impact your local area, the potential for community evacuation or sheltering, and your community's warning systems and what to do if they are used.
- ◆ Determine where to meet in the event of an emergency. Designate one location right outside your home in case of a

sudden emergency, like a fire, and another location outside your neighborhood in case you can't return home.

- ◆ Ask an out-of-town friend or relative to be your emergency contact. Following a disaster, family members should call this person and tell them where they are.
- ◆ Make a communication plan where all family members know how to contact each other. A form for recording this information can be found at [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov) - or at [www.redcross.org/contactcard](http://www.redcross.org/contactcard).
- ◆ Include provisions for your pets in your family disaster plan.
- ◆ Practice the plan.

Once you have developed your plan, you need to practice and maintain it. For example, ask questions to make sure your family remembers meeting places, phone numbers, and safety rules. Conduct routine fire and emergency evacuation drills, test fire alarms, and replace and update disaster supplies.



## Assemble a disaster supplies kit

Every household should assemble a disaster supplies kit and keep in up to date. A disaster supplies kit can help your family stay safe and be more comfortable during and after a disaster. Though local officials and relief workers will be on the scene after a disaster, they cannot reach everyone immediately. Also, if you need to evacuate at a moment's notice you probably will not have the opportunity to shop or search for the supplies you and your family will need.

- ◆ Pack disaster supplies in an easy-to-carry container, such as a duffel bag or backpack and label the container clearly.
- ◆ Ask your children to think of items that they would like to include in the kit, such as books, games or nonperishable snack food items.
- ◆ Include such items as:
  - Three-day supply of non-perishable food and manual can opener.
  - Three-day supply of water (one gallon of water per person per day).
  - Portable, battery-powered radio or television and extra batteries.
  - Flashlights and extra batteries.
  - First aid kit and first aid manual.
  - Photocopies of credit cards and identification cards.
  - Sanitation and hygiene items (hand sanitizer, moist towelettes and toilet paper).
  - Matches in a waterproof container.
  - Whistle.
  - Clothing, blankets, kitchen accessories and cooking utensils.
  - Special needs items, such as prescription medications, spare eye-glasses, hearing aid batteries.
  - Items for infants, such as formula, diapers, bottles and pacifiers.
  - Tools, pet supplies, a map of the local area, and other items to meet your unique family needs.
- ◆ Ask your children to help you remember to keep your kit updated by marking dates on a calendar to regularly review and update your kit.
- ◆ Consider having emergency supplies in each vehicle and at your place of employment.

## Learn More

The Federal Emergency Management Agency's Community and Family Preparedness Program and American Red Cross Community Disaster Education are nationwide efforts to help people prepare for disasters of all types.

For more information, please contact your local emergency management office or American Red Cross chapter. This booklet and the preparedness materials listed below are online at [www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov) and [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org). Other preparedness materials are available at these sites, as well as at [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov).

These publications are also available by calling FEMA at 1-800-480-2520, or writing:

**FEMA**  
**P.O. Box 2012**  
**Jessup, MD 20794-2012**

Publications with an "A" number are available from your local American Red Cross chapter.

- ◆ Are You Ready? An In-depth Guide to Citizen Preparedness (IS-22)
- ◆ Preparing for Disaster (FEMA 475) (A4600)
- ◆ Preparing for Disaster for People with Disabilities and other Special Needs (FEMA 476) (A4497)
- ◆ Food and Water in an Emergency (FEMA 477) (A5055)

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