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R&R

Response 8

Helping Children Cope with Disaster

Earthquakes...Tornadoes...Fires... Floods...Hurricanes... Hazardous Materials Spills

Disaster may strike quickly and without warning. These events can be frightening for adults and are traumatic for children if they don't know what to do.

During a disaster, your family may have to leave your home and daily routine. Children may become anxious, confused or frightened. As an adult, you'll need to cope with the disaster in a way that helps you help children avoid developing a permanent sense of loss. It is important to give children guidance that will help them reduce their fears.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the [American Red Cross](#) have this brochure to help you help your children cope. Ultimately, you should decide what's best for your children, but consider using these suggestions as guidelines.

Children and Their Response to Disaster

Children depend on daily routines: They wake up, eat breakfast, go to school, play with friends. In emergencies or disasters that interrupt this routine, children may become anxious.

In a disaster, they'll look to you and other adults for help. How *you* react to an emergency gives children clues on how to act. If you react with alarm, a child may become more scared. They see no proof that the danger is real. If you seem to overcome with a sense of loss, a child may feel that more strongly.

Children's fears also may stem from their imagination, and you should take these feelings into account. A child who *feels* afraid *is* afraid. Your words and actions can provide reassurance. When talking to your child, be sure to present a realistic picture that is both honest and manageable.

Feeling or fear are healthy and natural for adults and children. But as an adult, you need to maintain control of the situation. When you're sure that danger has passed, concentrate on your child's emotional needs by asking the child what's uppermost in his or her mind. Having children participate in the family's recovery activities will help them feel that their life will return to "normal." You during this time may have a lasting impact.

Be aware that after a disaster, children are *most afraid* that--

- the event will happen again.
- someone will be injured or killed.
- they will be separated from the family.
- they will be left alone.

Advice to Parents: Prepare for Disaster

You can create a Family Disaster Plan by taking four simple steps. First, learn what hazards your community and how to prepare for each. Then meet with your family to discuss what to do, as a group, in each situation. Next, take steps to prepare your family for disaster such as emergency phone numbers, selecting an out-of-state family contact, assembling disaster supplies for each member of your household and installing smoke detectors on each level of your home. Finally, practice your Family Disaster Plan so that everyone will remember what to do when disaster does occur.

- Develop and practice a Family Disaster Plan. Contact your local emergency management, civil defense office, or your local Red Cross chapter for materials that describe how your family can create a disaster plan. Everyone in the household, including children, should take part in the family's response and recovery efforts.
- Teach your child how to recognize danger signals. Make sure your child knows what warning detectors, fire alarms and local community warning systems (horns, sirens) sound like.
- Explain how to call for help. Teach your child how and when to call for help. Check the telephone directory for local emergency phone numbers and post these phone numbers in your home. If you live in a 9-1-1-service area, tell your child to call 9-1-1.
- Help your child memorize important family information. Children should memorize their name, address and phone number. They should also know where to meet in case of an emergency. Some children may not be old enough to memorize the information. They should carry a small index card that lists emergency information to give to an adult or baby-sitter.

AFTER THE DISASTER: TIME FOR RECOVERY

Immediately after the disaster, try to reduce your child's fear and anxiety.

- Keep the family together. While you look for housing and assistance, you may want to separate your children with relatives or friends. Instead, keep the family together as much as possible and make children a part of what you are doing to get the family back on its feet. Children are anxious, and they'll worry that their parents won't return.
- Calmly and firmly explain the situation. As best as you can, tell children what you know about the disaster. Explain what will happen next. For example, say, "Tonight, we will all stay together in the shelter." Get down to the child's eye level and talk to them.
- Encourage children to talk. Let children talk about the disaster and ask questions as they want. Encourage children to describe what they're feeling. Listen to what they say. If possible, include the entire family in the discussion.
- Include children in recovery activities. Give children chores that are their responsibility. This will help children feel they are part of the recovery. Having a task will help them understand that everything will be all right.

You can help children cope by understanding what causes their anxieties and fears. Reassure them with firmness and love. Your children will realize that life will eventually return to normal. If your child does not respond to the above suggestions, seek help from a mental health specialist or a member of the clergy.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency's Community and Family Preparedness Program developed this brochure in cooperation with the American Red Cross' Community Disaster Program. Both are national efforts to help people prepare for disasters of all types. For more information on how to prepare for and respond to disaster, contact your local or State office of emergency management and your local Red Cross chapter. Ask for "[Your Family Disaster Plan](#)". Write to: FEMA, P.O. Box 70274, Washington, D.C. 20024. FEMA L-196
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