

# Helping Children Cope with Disaster

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Children who are directly affected by a disaster may experience psychological traumas. You can help them recover more quickly and more fully by recognizing the symptoms of psychological trauma and taking steps to alleviate their stresses.

Researchers have shown that the more personal exposure a survivor has to the effects of a disaster, the greater the reactions after the disaster. The death of a family member, loss of a home, and destruction of a community are highly stressful events. In each of these, grief and trauma intertwine.

Research also indicates that children who experience an initial traumatic event before they are 11 years old are three times more likely to develop psychological symptoms than those who experience their first trauma as a teenager or later in life.

## Birth to age 2

Children younger than 2 have little understanding of cause-and-effect relationships, and they often have no past experience to help them deal with a crisis. Before they are old enough to speak, children have little way to communicate their stress.

However, they can retain memories of sights, sounds and smells related to the event, and later their play activities may involve acting out the trauma.

## Age 2 to 5

Children ages 2 to 5 may not understand the concept of permanent loss. After a disaster, they may have fears of abandonment. They also may reenact the disaster over and over to try to make sense of it. Preschool children may act out or regress in their behavior. They may experience loss of appetite, stomach-aches and sleep problems, including nightmares.

## How to help young children

- ◆ Reassure the children and give them physical comfort.
- ◆ Provide comforting bedtime routines.
- ◆ Avoid unnecessary separations.

- ◆ Permit the children to sleep in their parents' room temporarily.
- ◆ Encourage them to talk about their losses, such as the death of pets or loss of toys.
- ◆ Monitor their exposure to news media reports about the disaster.
- ◆ Encourage them to express their feelings and thoughts through play activities.

## Age 6 to 11

Children ages 6 to 11 understand the permanence of the loss and may have feelings of guilt or anger about the event. They may become preoccupied with the event, show signs of regressive behavior, have night terrors or want to stay home from school.

## How to help school-age children

- ◆ Give the children additional attention and consideration
- ◆ Temporarily relax your expectations of their performance at home and at school.
- ◆ Set gentle but firm limits for acting-out behavior.
- ◆ Provide structured but undemanding home chores and other activities.
- ◆ Encourage them to express their thoughts and feelings aloud and through play.
- ◆ Listen to the child's repeated retelling of the disaster event.
- ◆ Rehearse safety measures for future disasters.
- ◆ Develop a school disaster program to offer peer support, expressive activities, education on disasters, preparedness planning and identifying at-risk children.
- ◆ Long-term problems

Some children may have long-term problems such as depression, prolonged grief and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Therefore, it is important to recognize the signs of depression or PTSD in children.

Symptoms of depression in children may include persistent sad or irritable moods, loss of interest in activities they once enjoyed, a significant change in

appetite or body weight, oversleeping or difficulty sleeping, problems with movement or muscular skills (including agitation and slowed movement), loss of energy, feelings of worthlessness or inappropriate guilt, difficulty concentrating and recurrent thoughts of death or suicide.

If your child has five or more of these symptoms that persist for 2 or more weeks, it may signify a major depression. If you suspect a child is experiencing depression, have him or her evaluated by professional.

PTSD can develop at any age, including in childhood. Symptoms typically begin within 3 months of a traumatic event, although occasionally they do not begin until years later. Once PTSD occurs, the severity and duration of the illness varies. Some people recover within 6 months; others suffer much longer.

PTSD symptoms must be present for longer than 1 month and may include re-experiencing the event through play, nightmares, flashbacks and frightening thoughts; routinely avoiding reminders of the event; diminished interest or emotional numbness; increased sleep disturbances; irritability; poor concentration; depression; or regressive behavior.

As with depression, if you suspect a child is experiencing PTSD, have him or her evaluated by a qualified mental health professional.

## Monitoring children after a disaster

Some children may be slow to show distress because they don't feel upset. In these cases, it may take several weeks or even months for signs or symptoms of their distress to appear.

What is important to remember is that all children are better able to cope with a traumatic event if parents, friends, family, teachers and other adults support and help them. This help should start as soon as possible after the event and should include close monitoring of the children's behavior.

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