

Children and Responses to Disaster

Parent Handout

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

By Debby Waddell, Handouts Editor and Alex Thomas, Communique Editor

Background – Disasters can take many forms. They may be

- Weather-related, as in tornadoes, hurricanes, or floods;
- Accident-related, as in bus or automobile deaths or drowning;
- Illness-related, as in AIDS, cancer, or other deaths due to illness; or
- Bizarre and unusual, as in the case of snipers or a murder.

The emotional effects of a disaster on you and your child can be tremendous. One of the difficulties experienced by parents during disasters is that they have not had adequate time to deal with their own reactions when they are called upon to deal with the impact of the disaster on their child. This handout is designed to help you and your child during a disaster.

Emotional Reactions to Disaster

Emotional reactions vary in nature and severity from child to child. Children's reactions to disaster are determined by their previous experiences, their temperament and personality, and the immediacy of the disaster to their own lives. Nonetheless, some commonalities exist in how children (and adults) feel when their lives are disrupted by a disaster.

Loss of Control. By their very nature, disasters are something over which we have no control—if we did, we would stop them from happening. The feeling of loss of control can be overwhelming.

Loss of Stability. Disasters also interrupt the natural order of things. Stability is gone and this is very threatening; it can destroy trust and upset equilibrium for extended periods. After all, if this disaster could happen, then most anything else might happen too.

Self-centered Reactions. Children's immediate reaction to disaster often includes a fear for their own safety. They may be intensely worried about what will happen to them; to an extent that you think is unreasonable. However, young children have difficulty putting the needs of others before their own. Children need repeated reassurance regarding their own safety and the outcome of the disaster as it relates to them.

Stages of Reactions to Loss. Some reactions to disasters are similar to reactions to other losses or grief. These include denial, anger, depression, bargaining and acceptance. Not every person experiences all of these feelings, and they do not always occur in just this order. A person may feel angry, then depressed, then angry again. How feelings are expressed will vary with the age of the child. A very young child may express denial by refusing to talk about the situation or clowning when others are talking about the disaster. Older children may go to their rooms or insist on going to the mall. Anger in a young child may involve a tantrum and an older child may be manifested as yelling at a parent.

What to say to a child during or after a disaster

- Knowing what to say is often difficult. When no other words come to mind, a hug and saying, "this is really hard for us," will always work.
- Try to recognize the feeling underlying your child's actions and put it into words. Saying something like "It makes us mad to think about all the people and homes that were hurt by this hurricane," or "I can see you are feeling really sad about this," can help.

- Sometimes children may have an overwhelming fear that they are unable to put into words, and you may need to voice for them. For instance, if a friend loses his mother during a flood, you might want to say to your child, “You may be scared that something will happen to me and Daddy (or Mommy) too. We are safe, and the flood waters are leaving, so we aren’t going to die from this flood.”
- Be honest with your child about what has happened and what is happening.
- Don’t deny the seriousness of the situation. Saying to a child “Don’t cry, everything will be okay” does not reflect how the child feels and the child knows that, at least in the immediate future, this is not true.
- Help your child know what words to use with others. For instance, if the disaster has resulted in death, the child may feel overwhelmed about what to say to friends at the funeral home. You may need to help by suggesting some simple appropriate words.

Things to do with a child during and after a disaster

- Let your child be near you as much as he/she wants, and when this is not possible, find someone else with whom the child feels secure and make it clear to the child that this person will take care of him/her until you return.
- If you have to leave, you may need to reassure your child that you will return. If the disaster has involved loss of lives or homes, even when the real threat is past, it may take some time for your child to feel secure when separated from you. This is a very normal reaction and should lessen over time.

Prepare for difficulties with your child at night.

- If you can take the time to reestablish usual bedtime routines, such as story time, this can provide a sense of security.
- You may need to sit near your child until he/she falls asleep for a few nights. Gradually withdraw this support by saying that you will check back in two minutes and continue lengthening this time until your child feels secure again.
- If possible, you may want to ensure that your child has his/her special stuffed animal or usual pillow if you have to sleep in a strange place.
- For a while, a light may need to be left on in or near your child’s room.
- Siblings may want to sleep in the same room until they feel more secure again.

Include your child in funeral or memorial services unless your child specifically requests not to be there.

- In advance of the service or funeral home visit, explain what your child will see and hear.
- If you will be very involved during the service, find someone whose sole task is to be with your child.
- If feelings become too intense, allow your child to leave the service.

Plan something practical that your child can do to help with the disaster or memorialize someone who has died.

- If a disaster has ruined property, your child can help clean up or make sandwiches for others who are working.
- In the case of a death, your child may have some special activity he/she chooses to memorialize the person who has died. This could be writing a poem, drawing a picture, or taking a flower to the funeral. Your child can be the guide in what seems best to him/her.

Plan to spend extra time with your child as the emergency needs from the disaster decrease.

- Reading children’s books about similar incidents can provide a good beginning for discussions of your child’s feeling. Librarians can typically guide you in finding such books.
- Playing an extra game or just sitting with your child during playtime can provide an extra sense of security which might be badly needed.

Expect that resolving all of the feelings related to the disaster may take your child (and you) quite a while.

- It is normal for a child to bring up the disaster long after it has happened and often when you least expect it.
- Make sure your child's reaction is not more severe than that of other children. If you believe your child's reaction is extreme, seek professional assistance. Your school psychologist or counselor can assist or provide names of other professionals trained to deal with children. Signs of reactions which are extreme and need professional attention include:
 - Persistent re-experiencing of the traumatic event through intense recollections, dreams, flashbacks or hallucinations.
 - Persistent avoidance of objects and events associated with the trauma.
 - Numbing of responsiveness or diminished interest in usual activities.
 - Extreme withdrawal.
 - Continual weeping or crying.
 - Signs of increased arousal, such as sleep difficulties, irritability, disturbances in concentration, or exaggerated startle response.

You may notice several of these reactions in your child immediately following the disaster. However, if these extreme reactions continue over numerous weeks, your child probably needs extra assistance in dealing with the disaster.

Information contained in this handout, though intended to be helpful, and does not indicate official sanction or endorsement on the part of the Communique or the National Association of School Psychologists.