

After a Disaster – A Guide for Parents

Natural disasters can leave children feeling frightened, confused, and insecure. Whether a child has personally experienced the trauma or has seen the event on television or heard it discussed by adults, it is important for parents to be informed and ready to help if reactions to stress begin to occur.

Children respond to trauma in many different ways. Some may have reactions very soon after the trauma; others may seem to be doing fine for weeks or months, but begin to show worrisome behavior later. Knowing the signs that are common at different ages can help parents recognize potential problems and respond appropriately.

Preschool Age (Ages 1-5)

- Difficulty adjusting to the change and loss
- Depend on parents, family members and teachers to help them through difficult times since they have not developed their own coping skills yet
- May regress to an earlier behavioral stage after a traumatic event (thumb sucking, bedwetting, etc)
- Cling to a parent or teacher where they feel safe
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Unexplainable aches and pains
- Behavior changes that may include disobedience, hyperactivity, speech difficulties, aggressive or withdrawing behaviors and exaggerated stories about the event

Early Childhood (Ages 5-11)

- May have similar reactions as younger children including other childish behaviors
- Withdrawing from playgroups and friends
- Inability to focus or concentrate
- Dropping grades
- Behavior changes may include attention seeking behaviors and aggressiveness

Adolescence (Ages 12-14)

- Vague physical complaints
- Cease doing chores, school work or other responsibilities
- Withdrawing from friends, family, and activities they once enjoyed
- Deny the extent of their emotional reactions to the traumatic event
- Behavior changes may include resisting authority, disruptive at home or school, experimenting with risky behaviors (drinking or drug use)

How to Help

- Provide reassurance that things will get better
- Very young children need cuddling and verbal support
- Answer questions about the disaster honestly, but don't dwell on frightening details
- Encourage children of all ages to express their emotions about the event, either verbally or in drawings
- Maintain normal routines as much as possible
- Encourage participation in recreational activities and helping others impacted by the event
- Temporarily reduce your expectations for the child at home and at school
- Acknowledge your own reactions and take steps to promote your own physical and emotional healing

Source: U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services