

Large-Scale Natural Disasters: Helping Children Cope

Large-scale disasters, such as major hurricanes or earthquakes, can have a strong emotional effect even for people not directly affected by the disasters. The scope of devastation and loss of life can be very disturbing and hard to comprehend. Common reactions include sadness, concern for loved ones in affected areas, anxiety over a large scale disaster occurring at home, and the strong desire to help. Adults can help children by supporting their emotional and psychological needs, helping them understand the events factually, and providing the opportunity to process their reactions, as needed.

Identify vulnerable children and youth. The degree to which children are affected will vary depending on personal circumstances. Most vulnerable are children who:

- Had family members killed, injured, or missing in the disaster.
- Originally come from or have family still living in devastated communities.
- Have a strong sense of religious or cultural identity with the affected countries.
- Live in potentially vulnerable areas.
- Are survivors of other natural disasters.
- Have recently lost a loved one, particularly a parent.
- Suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, or other mental health disorder.

Talk to your children and students. At home or in class, take the time to discuss events factually. Use a map or globe and provide relevant information about seismology, geography, cultural issues, emergency and public health services, and more. Allow children to discuss their feelings and concerns, and encourage questions. However, some children may not want or need to talk about the event so do not force them to talk. Acknowledge and normalize their feelings. Let them know that others share their feelings and that their reactions are common and expected.

Be a good listener and observer. Let children guide you as to how concerned they are or how much information they need. If they are not focused on the tragedy, don't dwell on it. Be available to answer their questions to the best of your ability. Young children may not be able to express themselves verbally. Pay attention to changes in their behavior or social interactions. Most school-age children and adolescents can discuss their thoughts and feelings, although they may need you to provide an opening to start a conversation.

Highlight people's compassion and humanity. Large-scale tragedies often generate a tremendous outpouring of caring and support from around the world. Focus on the aid being provided by governments, nonprofit aid agencies, and individual donors. Discuss the difficult and complicated process of getting aid to the most severely affected areas and the cooperation between leaders and people of so many nations.

Do something positive with your children or students to help others in need. Taking action is one of the most powerful ways to help children feel more in control and to build a stronger sense of connection.

Suggestions include making individual donations to international disaster relief organizations, holding a school or community fundraiser, or even working to support families in need within the community.

Emphasize people’s resiliency. Help children understand the ability of people to come through a tragic event and go on with their lives. Focus on children’s own competencies in terms of their daily life and in difficult times. In age appropriate terms, identify other disasters from which communities or countries have recovered.

Be honest. Acknowledge your thoughts and feelings, but remain calm and reassuring. Be sure your comments are age appropriate, but know that even young children will feel more reassured and closer to you if you are honest. For older children in particular, it is okay to admit that you feel sad, perhaps a little helpless, and that you wish you could do more. Balance statements of concern with information about available emergency preparedness and response systems.

Limit exposure to media coverage. It is important to stay informed, but exposure to endless news may not be helpful. Images of the disaster itself and the resulting human suffering from injury, hunger, and disease can become overwhelming. Young children in particular cannot distinguish between media images and their personal reality. Older children may choose to watch the news, but caregivers need to be available to discuss what they see and help put it into perspective.

Maintain as much continuity and normalcy as possible. At home, spending family time doing regular activities, including eating meals together, reinforces children’s sense of stability and connectedness. At school, allowing students to deal with their reactions is important but so is providing a sense of normalcy. Regular classes, after school activities, and friends can help students feel more secure and better able to function.

Know potential child and adolescent reactions to trauma. Most children will be able to cope with their concerns over current events with the help of parents and other caring adults. Symptoms may differ depending on age. Common reactions include:

- **Preschoolers**—thumb sucking, bedwetting, clinging to parents, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, fear of the dark, regression in behavior, and withdrawal from friends and routines.
- **Elementary school children**—irritability, aggressiveness, clinginess, nightmares, school avoidance, poor concentration, and withdrawal from activities and friends.
- **Adolescents**—sleeping and eating disturbances, agitation, increase in conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behavior, and poor concentration.

However, some children may be at risk of more extreme reactions because of personal circumstances. Adults should contact a professional if children exhibit significant changes in behavior or any of the above symptoms over an extended period of time.

Resources

All handouts referenced above can be accessed at http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/index.aspx. There are many organizations and agencies with helpful information about helping children and families cope with natural disasters and other crises.

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