Helping children cope with disaster

Disasters can be scary for anyone. Children think about the world in a different way than adults. And they may have a hard time letting you know how they feel or what they need.

Remember that children often look to adults to learn how to respond. So they may be affected by your reactions. Be open and honest with your children about your concerns but try not to alarm them.

Children's reactions are affected by their age and how close they were to the event. Keep reading to learn how children may respond to a crisis and how you can support them.

Infants and toddlers

Even infants and young children can pick up on the distress of adults. If you're upset, your child may show signs of anxiety. Children this young can't express their feelings in words. Instead they might:

- Get extra clingy
- Have changes in sleep or eating
- Cry a lot
- Have more tantrums
- Act aggressively

Tips for helping an infant or toddler cope

There are things you can do to help your young child. Consider these tips:

- Make sure your child is supervised at all times. If you can't be with your child, try to avoid switching to a new caregiver. That kind of change may add to your child's anxiety.
- Hold and comfort your child as much as possible — especially when they're crying or upset.
- If your child is being aggressive, redirect them to positive activities. Look for relaxing things they can do.
- Speak softly and be as calm as possible around your child.
- Give your child a lot of attention.

A baby/toddler's stress may only last a short time. But ongoing or repeated stress may affect your child long-term. If you're concerned about any extreme behavior, call your child's doctor right away.

Preschoolers (ages 3 to 5)

Preschoolers may find it hard to adjust to stress, change and loss since they don't have their own coping skills yet. You may notice:

- Regression (bedwetting, thumb-sucking, potty accidents)
- Fear of strangers, darkness or "monsters"
- Clinginess
- Changes in eating, sleep and behavior
- Disobedience, tantrums or hyperactivity

Young children may complain of aches and pains. They may also tell larger-than-life stories about the event or talk about it over and over. These are some ways young children try to cope with a crisis.

Tips for helping a preschooler cope

There are things you can do to help your young child. Consider these tips:

- Try to keep daily life as normal as possible and keep regular routines. Children often find routines comforting.
- Talk with your child about their feelings and listen without judgment. Ask simple questions such as, "How are you feeling?" Look for nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, posture and tone of voice.. These can tell you more about how your child feels.
- Reassure your child often.
- Surround yourself and your child with loved ones, friends and others who offer comfort and support.
- Help your child regain faith in the future by helping them develop plans for activities that will take place later — next week, next month, etc.
- Try not to focus on immature behavior. Find out what's upsetting your child and then correct the behavior. Be sure to praise your child often for good choices.
- Turn off TV and radio reports about the disaster when your child can see or hear them.
- Spend extra time with your child if possible.

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School-aged children (ages 5 to 12)

School-aged children may have reactions similar to younger children. You may notice your school-aged child is easily upset and has mood swings. And you may observe:

- Regressing to younger behaviors (e.g. asking parents to feed or dress them)
- Withdrawing from playgroups and friends
- Competing for parents' attention
- Worrying about going to school or being away from parents
- Having trouble focusing on schoolwork

Tips for helping a school-aged child cope

There are things you can do to help your child. Consider these tips:

- Be with your child as much as possible.
- Try to keep daily life as normal as possible and resume regular routines. Children often find routines comforting.
- Talk with your child about their feelings and listen without judgment. Ask simple questions such as, "How are you feeling?" and "What worries you the most?" Listen carefully for clues about hidden feelings or worries.
- Stress that this is an unexpected event. But avoid making false promises, such as "Nothing like this will ever happen to you again."
- You may let older children watch TV news briefly with you. Use this as a time to talk about subjects like coping with life's difficulties.
- Help your child give support to others. Organize a food drive or encourage your child to donate clothing or canned goods to those in need.

Adolescents (ages 13 to 18)

Like pre-teens, teens are likely to have vague physical complaints when under stress. They may brush off chores, schoolwork and other responsibilities.

Younger adolescents may compete for attention from parents and teachers. But others may withdraw, resist authority or become disruptive at home or school.

Children at this age are also more likely to begin trying out high-risk behaviors like drinking or drug use to deal with stress. Older teens may feel helplessness and guilt because they want to assume adult tasks. They may respond with prejudice against certain groups of people. Some older teens may also try to deny their feelings and act like they're fine.

Tips for helping a teen cope

There are things you can do to help your teen. Consider these tips:

- Reassure your child that people are trying to help.
- Ask teens what they've heard from the media, friends or online sources. Try to clear up any rumors.
- Let your child know it's okay to be angry about what happened. Teach your child to manage those feelings. You might suggest safe ways to vent anger, like exercise or writing in a journal.
- Suggest that your teen join or start volunteer efforts at school or in the community. These could include a toy or food drive or bake sale to help others.

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