

Helping Children Cope

Disasters can leave children and teens feeling frightened, confused and insecure. And kids' responses can be quite varied. It's important to not only recognize these reactions, but also help children cope with their emotions.

You are their biggest influence.

When you can manage your own feelings, you can make disasters less traumatic for your kids.

- **Encourage dialogue.** Listen to your kids. Ask them about their feelings. Validate their concerns.
- **Answer questions.** Give just the amount of information you feel your child needs. Clarify misunderstandings about risk and danger.
- **Be calm, be reassuring.** Discuss concrete plans for safety. Have children and teens contribute to the family's recovery plan.
- **Shut off the TV!** News coverage of disasters creates confusion and anxiety. Repeated images may lead younger kids to believe the event is recurring. If your children do watch TV or use the Internet, be with them to talk and answer questions.
- **Find support.** Whether you turn to friends, family, community organizations or faith-based institutions, building support networks can help you cope, which will in turn help your children cope.

For many kids, reactions to disasters are brief. But some children can be at risk for more enduring psychological distress. Three risk factors for this longer-lasting response are:

- **Direct exposure to the disaster** such as being evacuated, observing injuries of others, or experiencing injury
- **Loss/grief** relating to the death or serious injury of family or friends
- **On-going stress** from secondary effects, such as temporary housing, loss of social networks, loss of personal property, or parent's unemployment



Responding to an emergency is one thing ...
what's the best way to respond to your
child during or after a disaster?

Frequently Asked Questions

Select an age group on the left to read parents' questions, and see how child psychologists would respond based on each developmental stage.

Ages 0-2

Q. My baby used to sleep through the night just fine. But ever since I lost power for three days after last month's hurricane, she's been up constantly. Why?

A. Children, including babies and toddlers, may experience stress after a disaster. Even though your family's life may be back to normal, your baby could be holding onto some of the stress of the event and its aftermath. She may revert to earlier behaviors in areas like sleeping, toileting or eating. Cuddle, comfort and play with her a lot, and take comfort knowing that this regressive behavior is temporary.

Q. My home suffered damage and my workplace has closed as a result of a major storm. This has been an incredibly stressful time for our family. How can I make sure my toddler is okay?

A. Young children experience stress, too, and are very aware of their parents' reactions and emotions. You may notice your baby startling more, acting withdrawn, or fearing separation from you. It's important to take care of yourself—for your sake and your child's. But at the same time, it's important to make your child feel safe and secure. One of the best ways to do this is by reestablishing normal routines as quickly as possible. Physical contact like hugs and cuddling is also important.

Q. I survived a tornado and was displaced for months afterwards. My son was only a baby, but what behaviors might I see in the future?

A. Even children who are pre-verbal retain memories of important or stressful events in their lives, and reminders like strong winds can trigger those memories. Young children process their experiences through play. This is an important and healthy part of their development. Your child may not be able to talk about the tornado, but through play, attempt to understand the event and perhaps even give it a new (and happier) ending. You can encourage this process by following their lead and joining in play. And take comfort knowing that children are resilient, especially when they receive nurturing and support from a trusted adult during and after a traumatic event like a tornado.

Q. I lost my home in a fire. I'm trying to hold it together in front of my 2-year-old, but am often on the verge of tears. What do I do?

A. It's okay for your child to see you cry – as long as you don't lose control. In fact, when you display your emotions, it gives your child permission to have feelings, too. Explain why you are crying, and reassure your child that even though you are sad, you know things will get better and you will all get through this together. And then share a hug. It may not seem like much, but physical contact is important for both adults and kids - and it's an easy way for even the youngest child to be a helper.

Ages 3-6

Q. I experienced an earthquake. It was terrifying, walls were crumbling, and my 5-year-old asked, "Are we going to die?" What was the right answer?

A. "No! We'll be fine!" The best response is one of comfort, even if you're not entirely sure it's true. Hope is powerful. Kids need to articulate their fears, and it's important as parents that we keep those lines of communication open and validate their concerns. So acknowledge that this is a scary time, but reassure your child that you will all be okay because you know what to do in emergencies and that there are helpers who will take care of everyone. And then share a hug. It will make you both feel better and allows even the youngest child to be a helper.

Q. A tornado swept through our community. Now my preschooler refuses to go to school and says, "I want you!" What do I say?

A. "I know the tornado was scary. But I always come back and your teachers know what to do to keep you safe in case of an emergency." As much as we want to redirect children's attention away from something scary, it's important to acknowledge their fears so that they feel understood, and then reassure them that everything will be okay. Separation anxiety is a normal response to an upsetting event – and while that can be frustrating for parents, take comfort in the fact that kids are resilient, and with loving reassurance, this clingy behavior is probably temporary.

Q. A hurricane recently destroyed many homes and buildings in our community. Now my son smashes everything in sight – blocks, food, sofa cushions. What do I do?

A. Play smash with him. At this age, it's all about play. And reenacting scary events through play can be very healing. It allows children to process and understand what has happened, have control over the situation, and even rewrite the ending. In the same way that adults often need to talk with others about emotional situations, children need an audience for their play. So pull out the blocks and play with him. Provide toys that allow your son to act out what's on his mind – blocks, little people, even pans of water for things to float away.

Q. We lost our home in a fire. I'm trying to hold it together in front of my kindergartener, but am often on the verge of tears. What do I do?

A. It's okay for your child to see you cry – as long as you don't completely lose control. In fact, when you display your emotions, it gives your child permission to have feelings, too. Explain why you are crying, and reassure your child that even though you are sad, you know things will get better and you will all get through this together. And then share a hug. It may not seem like much, but physical contact is important for both adults and kids - and it's an easy way for even the youngest child to be a helper.

Q. There's a winter storm warning in effect and all we hear about on TV and the radio is "The Blizzard of the Century." My kids are getting scared. Any advice?

A. Turn off the TV. This advice holds true for children of all ages. Unless you need to see coverage of a storm for safety reasons (in which case, try not to do it in view of children) turn off the TV and radio. This is especially true after a disaster when scary images may be shown repeatedly. Young children may think the event is happening over and over and this can be terrifying. Instead, empower kids by enlisting their help to prepare for the storm. Have them gather warm blankets, or check on the pet's food. Giving them a job helps them feel in control, which reduces their anxiety.

Ages 7-10

Q. I'm dealing with the aftermath of severe flooding in our town. My 8-year-old's room is a total disaster. Clothes are piled on the dresser, he sleeps with every toy on his bed, and I just found a bag of candy in his closet. How can I make him understand that I need him to be on his best behavior?

A. Ask him if he's worried about another flood. Kids often prepare for danger in their own way, without talking about what they are doing. While his behavior may seem irrational, it sounds like your son may be preparing for another flood – saving his toys, and building his own emergency kit (albeit, an unhealthy one!) Ask him about his concerns, and enlist his help in preparing a better emergency kit. (Click on “Build a Kit” at the top of this page to learn more.) He'll feel good knowing that he is helping the family.

Q. We're under a hurricane watch – that's all we hear about on the news - and my daughter is very nervous. What do I do to help her feel secure?

A. Turn off the TV and enlist her help. This advice holds true for children of all ages. Unless you need to see coverage of a storm for safety reasons (in which case, try not to do it in view of children) turn off the TV and radio, especially after a disaster, when scary images may be shown repeatedly. Explain that you may experience a blackout and then give her a job to do – whether that's checking the flashlight batteries, making sure there's enough pet food, or being in charge of making sure no one opens the refrigerator during the storm.

Q. A tornado swept through our neighborhood and so many of our friends lost their homes. My son can't stop talking about it. What should I say?

A. “We were very lucky. Let's think of ways we can help those who are struggling.” In talking about others, your son may also be wondering about his own safety. Try to be patient, as children may need to discuss events repeatedly in order to work through them. Focus on your son's strengths and on other communities that have been hurt and have recovered. Your son needs extra reassurance, so give him hugs and let him talk about his feelings. Find ways that he can help others – whether that's writing letters of support, baking cookies for friends and neighbors, or collecting essential items for families in need. Helping others is incredibly empowering.

Q. We lost our home in a house fire. My twins can't stop crying and seem so clingy. What can I do?

A. Get some paper and markers, and help them write a story about it. It's very common for children to regress after a trauma – whether that's sucking a thumb, not being able to sleep in their own bed, or being clingy or moody. The best thing children can do is express their emotions. Allow them to talk about their feelings. Give them extra hugs and reassure them that even though life is hard now, it will be okay and you have a plan. Help them write about what happened, give them toys - like little people or a house - that allow them to reenact the experience, or let them fill a helium balloon with a message to your house and let it float away. This can be very healing. And take comfort knowing that children are very resilient when they have the support of a caring and trusted adult.

Q. We experienced an earthquake. It was terrifying and I still panic and find myself about to cry. What do I do?

A. It's okay for your child to see you cry – as long as you don't completely lose control. In fact, when you display your emotions, it gives your child permission to have feelings, too. Explain why you are crying, and reassure your child that even though you are sad, you know things will get better and you will all get through this together. And then ask for a hug. It may not seem like much, but physical contact is important for both adults and kids - and it's an easy way for kids to be helpers.

Ages 11+

Q. Ever since wildfires threatened our community and forced us to evacuate, my 14-year-old daughter has been obnoxious. How can I make it stop?

A. It can be hard to distinguish between normal teen behavior and anxiety from a traumatic event. Kids don't always talk openly about their feelings; instead, they may seem irritable or forgetful. They may also withdraw or have difficulties concentrating at school. That doesn't mean they don't need to talk. Keep the lines of communication open without forcing it. Casually bring up the subject and say something like, "I've been thinking about those fires all day. Do you ever think about it?" And if your teen really can't open up to you (which can be typical for teens), try to find another trusted adult she can confide in.

Q. Our town was hit hard by a tornado and our home was damaged. But all my son can talk about are his friends and how rough they have it. Any advice?

A. Teenagers are very concerned with their friends and social lives. But underneath what may be a genuine concern for others may also be a fear for his own safety and security. He just can't express it. Talking with him about his friends may be a good way to start a conversation about your family and your son's feelings. Focus on his friends' strength and resiliency. Point out other communities that have been hit hard but have overcome disasters. And find ways for him to pitch in – whether at home or in the community. Having a job to do will help him feel in control, and thus more secure.

Q. We endured a massive snowstorm and lost power. It could be days before we get electricity again. My 12-year-old keeps asking, "When will it come back on?" How do I answer her?

A. "Hopefully soon. Let's talk about what we can do in the meantime." Even though they're getting older, teens still need reassurance that everything will be okay. And they need to talk about their feelings. So keep those lines of communication open and enlist their help – whether shoveling snow or gathering warm blankets for everyone in the family. The more children participate in helping, the more in control they will feel.

Q. A hurricane tore through our city. Homes were lost, jobs were lost ... life is not normal. How do I know if my 16-year-old is okay?

A. Teens often say more with their actions than words. After an upsetting event, they could be irritable, clingy, withdrawn or even forgetful. There may even be changes in eating and sleeping. Don't get angry if they can't focus on homework, or talk back. Instead, keep the lines of communication open by asking how they're feeling, or if they ever think about the storm. And then find ways that they can help others – whether it's cleaning up debris, or organizing a food drive. Helping can be incredibly healing and empowering.