

# Consumer and Family Sciences



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## Children as Victims of Natural Disasters

**T**here are both commonalities and unique features in every disaster as it affects families. This fact sheet uses the research on children affected by political violence as a guide to how children may be affected by natural disasters and to provide recommendations to support children and families.

There are several levels at which children may be touched by floods, tornadoes, earthquakes, and other natural disasters.

- Some children and families are in the path of the destruction. They may struggle for their basic existence.
- Some children and families are displaced or flee the destruction and may not have a home or jobs to which to return.
- Some children and families have family members or friends in the worst-hit areas and are worried about their safety. Other children are worried about family members and friends who are in the area as relief workers or officials.
- Children close by or far away may be affected by the economic outcomes of the disaster.
- Although many children do not feel a direct impact of a natural disaster, they watch the news coverage and reactions of others and may feel concerned and confused.

Each of these levels is addressed below.

### Children and families in the path of a natural disaster

The impact is most immediate and dire for this group. Many lose their homes, lose family members and friends, and face the fact that the infrastructure that supported their daily lives is gone. Many of their basic physical needs may not be met, so they could be at risk of dehydration, starvation or malnutrition, exposure to the elements, and diseases and injuries related to lack of sanitation and safe housing. Schools, stores, and medical facilities may not be available. There may be no basic utilities to meet their needs.

In addition to the fact that their basic physical needs are not met, many of these children witness terrible events, possibly seeing death and violence, and watch the anger, frustration, and desperation of the adults around them. Some of the children have been separated from their parents or other loved ones. These experiences result in serious emotional needs that may not be met.

The first priority for these children is clearly to meet their basic needs. As much as possible, these children should be protected from the physical and psychological dangers around them, but parents will need help in accomplishing that goal. The environment must make it possible for parents to provide the basic necessities to their children. Only after that occurs will parents be able to help the children deal with the stress and trauma.

## Displaced children and families

Some families are displaced people in their own state or country. Although they may have escaped the worst of the destruction, they are dealing with major losses in their lives. They may have lost their homes and other belongings. They certainly have lost their familiar routine and location. Children may not be attending school, or they may be attending a new school—an event for which they had no preparation.

A difficulty in supporting these children is that their parents will also be traumatized and struggling. They have also been uprooted and have experienced major losses. The parents may feel guilt and frustration with not being able to provide everything their children need.

Recommendations for displaced families:

- Take care of the parents' needs. Research has shown that children will cope better with disasters if their parents cope well. Find a way for parents to talk about their feelings and get support. Some of this

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should take place away from the ears and eyes of the children so the parents do not need to worry about being strong or in charge. If the parents' needs are too high, find other support people to help the children cope while the parents get assistance. These may be relatives, friends, or volunteers. The children need to know the parents are safe and functioning, but the parents may not be able to meet all of the children's needs at this time.

- Look for ways to re-establish some routines that were in place before the crisis. Tell the same bedtime stories, try to eat some of the same foods, and use or replace favorite blankets or toys. This will help both the children and the parents.
- Set and enforce limits on the child's behavior. Even though the child has been traumatized, expectations for the child's actions are still important. The rules can be reassuring to a child who is feeling out of control. Parents should allow children to express their feelings and get extra support, but there should still be a bedtime, children should have some simple chores to do, and they need to know that things like hitting other people or taking things from others is still not allowed.
- Listen to the children and try to answer questions. Some questions will be difficult to answer, such as "Why did the disaster happen?" or "When will we be able to go home?" Some of their concerns may be related to misunderstandings. Parents can provide correct information and make the child feel better. In some cases, parents may need to say that they don't know the answer either. Sometimes the parent and child can look for answers together.
- Reassure children appropriately. Parents may know that their home is gone, and they will never be able to return. If so, they could explain to the children that the family will find a new home and that they can make it as special as the old one was. If the family hopes to return to the former home but knows that it will be a long time, the children could be involved in making some simple decisions about the repairs, such as the color of their bedrooms or a kind of tree they would like to plant in the yard. In the meantime, it is important for the children to know that the parents will be with them and will do everything they can to keep them safe.
- Help the children mourn. Although they are young, children feel losses, but in a different way from adults. They may miss different things from adults. It might be helpful for parents to talk with children about what they miss from their home, school, or neighborhood. The children could draw some pictures of those items. Families may want to create a kind of memorial service for their houses or even for items such as swing sets. It is important for children to say good-bye to toys and other items that were important to them.
- Watch for trauma reactions. Children may develop long-term fears of sirens, storms, rain, loud noises, separation from parents, and other events. In most children, this will get better over time. In addition, children may have nightmares and other difficulties dealing with the memories and losses. Again, those should go away over time. If the fears and worries make it difficult for the children to function in their normal lives and this difficulty lasts very long, it will be important to get outside help.
- Keep in mind that children will respond to events on a different timetable than adults. It may look as if they have not reacted at all in the first days or weeks after the event, but months later they may have serious difficulties. Do not assume that they

are not affected if they don't talk about the situation now. Do not create a "cycle of silence." This happens when parents assume that children are not reacting, so they don't talk about the issues. Children see that the parents are not talking, so they begin to believe that it is not okay to talk about it. The crisis becomes a taboo subject, and nobody's needs are met. Children and parents will need to have many conversations over many years. Parents should make sure the children know they want to hear the children's thoughts, feelings, and questions.

## Children concerned about family or friends in the area of the storm

Children who have friends and family working in the region of the destruction may be very concerned about their welfare. It is difficult for children (and for some adults) to know how close their loved ones may be to the places being shown in the media. The media images of chaos and pain make them worry whether their friends and family members are safe and secure. In some cases, they may not know when they will be able to talk with or see their loved ones.

**A**dults should watch TV reports about the disaster when children are busy with other things. The younger the children, the less they will benefit from the news coverage.

Recommendations for children and families worried about loved ones:

- If possible and appropriate, allow children and family members to be in touch with the person in the affected area. If phone contact or mail is possible, it will be very helpful for children to exchange messages to be reassured that the loved ones are safe.
- If the loved ones are out of contact, encourage children to write letters or journals, make audio or video recordings, or draw pictures for the family members or friends. They could plan to give those messages to the friends and relatives when they are back in contact.

This may help them to feel closer. It also might be good to look at pictures or listen to recordings of the people who seem very far away.

- Try to limit media exposure. Although it may be tempting to watch TV to try to catch a glimpse of loved ones, the constant reminders of tragedy and problems may end up being more distressing. Try to keep the children informed about loved ones through letters, phone calls, and perhaps written reports.

- It is good for older children to learn about their friends and family members. They also will know a lot about the situation and be especially worried about loved ones. But the intense news coverage may not be the best way to learn. A better way to help them become aware of the events may be with letters, phone calls, and messages from friends and family members.
- Find ways to take action and help. Taking action can help children feel in control. The kind of action may vary according to the child's age. (see Children taking action)

## Children taking action

Young children benefit from play. They may act out the events in the news and try to get control over the outcome. Some play activities related to disasters are building houses and knocking them down (and building them back up), playing with boats and water, hiding toys in a pile of blocks or in the sand and searching for them, pretending to be rescue workers, or drawing pictures of natural disasters.

**School-age children** may want to help to collect materials to support families and relief workers; draw or write poems or letters; prepare a performance like a play, dance, or skits; write letters to children in the affected communities or those who have lost loved ones; or learn about disasters, weather, or geography.

**Adolescents** can help collect materials for the support of displaced families and survivors; give blood; write letters to specific people or communities; organize a vigil or memorial service; or study weather, geography, history of the region, or the distribution of goods in a disaster.

**Young adults** can reach out to people in their community who have survived disasters or are preparing for them, organize discussion groups or action groups, give blood, and raise funds. They may want to study the effectiveness of preparedness efforts and city planning in high-risk areas. They also may want to explore the role of poverty in a disaster.

## Children impacted by the economic repercussions of the hurricane

Natural disasters can result in economic outcomes that impact families. School bus routes may change, the cost of goods used by children may rise, and

communities may need to cut services that benefit children. Some recommendations for minimizing negative repercussions of this situation follow:

**As resources become strained, it is important for both communities and individual families to maintain a focus on their priorities.**

- As resources become strained, it is important for both communities and individual families to maintain a focus on their priorities. Remember that reductions in essential services for children could have very long-term implications for those children and the families and communities in which they live.

- Remember that the most vulnerable individuals in any community are

impacted first when hardships occur. This includes children, the elderly, and those with special health and learning needs. Communities will be strong if they care for and support their weaker citizens.

- As decisions are made about distributing scarce resources, research findings and content experts can be of invaluable assistance. Consult them to make the most educated decisions regarding meeting the needs of children.

### Children watching from a distance

It may seem that children far from the disaster will not need to talk about it or need any reassurance or assistance. This is not true, however. Television and other news sources talk about disasters continuously, and the involvement of pop stars and other media figures brings large events into the lives of children across the country. The recommendations below suggest ways to help children who are watching from a distance to make this a learning experience and take action:

- It may be important to reassure children and correct misunderstandings. Some may be afraid that a disaster will come to their community. Let them know if there are dangers that children can prepare for, or reassure them that some events will not come to their area. Take time to talk about the natural hazards that are local, and teach them some simple ways to keep themselves safe.
- Although it is important to deal with children's fears, expect their emotions to go beyond that reaction. It is very likely that children will also be sad about what is happening to other people, and they may also be angry about the fact that not all of the people are being helped as quickly as they would like. Let them express the full range of emotions.
- Provide some information to children. Answer their questions, and consider looking up answers to questions you cannot answer quickly. Follow the child's lead. Stop talking about the situation when the child seems satisfied. Be prepared for new questions to appear later.
- Monitor media exposure. It is not appropriate for young children to see many of the images. Adults should watch TV reports about the disaster when children are busy with other things. The younger the children, the less they will benefit from the news coverage. Young children are likely to lose patience quickly with the constant news reporting when a major event has occurred. They probably will not watch for long. However, some of the reporting is likely to include a large amount of action footage that gets children's attention. Parents can encourage the children to watch children's videos instead, or, better yet, they can turn off the TV and go outside or play a game.
- It is good for older children to learn about current events. But the intense news coverage may not be the best way to learn. A better way to help them become aware of the events may be with print media or the Internet. Newspaper pictures are not as disturbing as video. It is also possible for adults to preview a newspaper or look at a Web site before showing it to the child. Previewing cannot usually happen with live TV.

- Find ways to take action and help. Taking action can help children feel in control. The kind of action may vary according to the child's age (see Children taking action)

## Sources

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