

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH TRAUMATIC EVENTS

Suggestions for Parents

We are all feeling a bit jumpy in response to recent hurricane events. You may find your children reacting in different ways, depending on their age and temperament. It is not unusual for children (or adults) to exhibit signs of anxiety or stress for several weeks after a traumatic event such as a devastating hurricane.

One of the difficulties experienced by parents during disasters is that they have not had adequate time to deal with their own reactions when they are called upon to deal with the impact of the disaster on their child. This handout is designed to help you and your child during a disaster.

Some people experience a "delayed reaction" and may not respond until sometime later.

Signs of stress include:

1. Physical ailments (stomach aches, headaches)
2. Sleep disorders (nightmares, excessive sleeping)
3. Regression to younger behavior (thumb-sucking, bedwetting, clinging)
4. Unusual crying, tantrums, fears or anxieties
5. Inability to concentrate, poor school performance
6. Acting out by older children (use of drugs or alcohol, risk-taking behavior)
7. Change in eating habits
8. Keeping to one's self
9. Loss of interest in play

Fortunately, there are things we can do as parents and adults to help children cope with exposure to a traumatic situation. These include the following:

Understand the kinds of fears and anxiety your children may be feeling. Your children's fears may not be realistic, but they are very real to them. Children will express fears that the hurricane will happen again. We need to acknowledge these concerns.

Allow children to express their feelings. Many children will want to talk (and talk and talk) about the storm. Others may need to express their fears through drawing, clay or other play activities. It is most helpful if you simply listen and encourage them to express their feelings without making value judgments or telling them it will never happen again. Do reassure them that you will do all you can to make it as safe for them as possible.

Be aware of your own feelings. Share your feelings and experiences with your children as you feel comfortable.

Answer your children's questions with simple, accurate information. You may need to answer the same questions over and over as the child seeks reassurance and an understanding of the situation.

Provide extra attention and physical contact if necessary. Lots of touching and holding is comforting for children. Take extra time when putting them to bed.

Resume your regular schedules and activities as soon as possible. Now and then take a break and have some fun together.

Allow children to help others through some form of donation or other activities. We all feel better if we can do something positive after a traumatic event.

Review your family emergency plan with your children (for example, where to go if there is a problem, how to contact one another, where emergency supplies are kept). Such a plan may be comforting and provide reassurance.

Seek professional help if you or your children are still experiencing much distress over the storm and you are not seeing improvement over time. Feel free to contact your guidance counselor, school psychologist, or social worker who can tell you what services are available through the school and help you identify resources in your community.

Sources: "Helping Cope With Traumatic Events," Florida Association of School Psychologists
"Children and Responses to Disaster," National Association of School Psychologists

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