

Helping Children Cope with Storm Experiences: Tips for Parents

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As Broward County students endured a long and strenuous hurricane season, it is important to understand the impact this stressful experience can have. Hurricane warnings often provide time for families to prepare for their arrival, but many people make last-minute decisions about what needs to be done. Complicating the matter is the urgency families feel to complete their preparations, such as getting food, batteries, putting up shutters, and making good safety plans. In addition, the media, while keeping people informed of what needs to be done, inundates people with hurricane news. Children may also be faced with the problem of evacuation. Not only does this create a sense of anxiety, but it also causes concern for the safety of friends and family, as well as worry about possible destruction to the neighborhood.

During the storm, families are faced with many potential problems as the intensity of the storm rises and diminishes. Some children have the experience of “digging in,” using bathtubs and closets as safe places during the storm. This may be followed by a period of relative calm, during which families may assess the damage to their homes and neighborhoods. This peaceful cycle may then be followed by extreme conditions that cause families to seek shelter once again. Other families may experience prolonged waiting, as they hear the news of families and friends losing power, water, or even that they have experienced destructive conditions.

The amount of death and destruction caused by the hurricanes affect children’s reactions after the storm has passed. Some children are directly affected, while others are not harmed. Even if there is no physical harm to families or their homes, there may be other circumstances that cause hardship. Having to deal with loss of electricity or not being able to use phones can create feelings of isolation. Children often need assistance in getting settled again into a familiar routine. When schools, stores, and public areas remain closed, children may still show signs of worry, or may fear that the storm will return.

These combined factors can result in unexpected reactions in children. Anxiety, apprehension, regression, confusion, and/or denial sometimes occur during the preparation stage. During the storm, anxiety is likely to continue. In addition, some children experience prolonged worry, withdrawal, and feelings of being overwhelmed. After the storm has passed, those who are affected directly may feel as if they are being punished. Children who have escaped physical damage may initially react with joy. However, these emotions may become tempered by later recognition of the impact on other communities. Some children, of course, cope well with storm conditions, following the lead of their parents or family members to remain calm and help out with preparations.

Children’s responses vary depending on their age. Responses also differ depending on how much destruction and/or death they see. In extreme cases, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can develop in children several months or even years after the disaster. Young children often relive the trauma while playing, or through dreams and nightmares. According to the

National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), parents should watch for changes in behavior after a crisis. Potential indications of problems include:

- **Preschoolers**-thumb sucking, bedwetting, clinging to parent, 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 friends and activities.
- **Adolescents**-sleeping and eating disturbances, agitation, increase in conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behavior, and poor concentration.

When any crisis or trauma occurs, children sense anxiety and tension in adults. They often experience feelings similar to adults, such as helplessness or loss of control. However, children are often too inexperienced to put the crisis in proper perspective. Parents need to be prepared for the consequences a crisis may bring to the family and how to help their children cope with its aftermath. Parents are strongly encouraged to speak with their children about the crisis to help them develop necessary coping skills. The following are suggestions for parents on how to communicate with children and adolescents following a time of crisis:

- **Encourage your children to ask questions:** Listen to what they say, provide comfort and assurance that address their fears.
- **Reassure your children** that they are safe from harm and are being protected.
- **Be honest:** Tell them exactly what has happened. Don't be afraid to admit that you can't answer all of their questions.
- **Find out what frightens them:** Encourage them to talk about their fears. If you are frightened, don't minimize the danger but explain to them how you are coping with your own fears and anxiety.
- **Focus on the positive:** Let them know that everything is being done to recover from the disaster. Remind them of heroic actions that have helped victims of the tragedy and the assistance offered by people throughout the state and country.
- **Avoid overexposure to the media:** Parents may wish to limit their children's exposure to television covering the disaster. When possible, parents should watch these reports with their children and answer questions as they arise.
- **Develop a plan:** Establish a family emergency plan for the future so your children will know what to do if an emergency occurs. This can help your children feel safer during a crisis.