

Children In Case of Emergency

Children & Disasters

Disasters may strike quickly and without warning. These events can be frightening for adults, but they are traumatic for children if they don't know what to do. During a disaster, your family may have to leave your home and daily routine. Children may become anxious, confused, or frightened. It is important to give children guidance that will help them reduce their fears.



Children and Their Response to Disaster

Children depend on daily routines. When emergencies or disasters interrupt this routine, children may become anxious. In a disaster, they'll look to you and other adults for help. How you react to an emergency gives them clues on how to act. If you react with alarm, a child may become more scared. They see our fear as proof that the danger is real. Unlike adults, however, children have little experience to help them place their current situation into perspective. Each child responds differently to disasters, depending on his or her understanding and maturity, but it's easy to see how an event like this can create a great deal of anxiety in children of all ages because they will interpret the disaster as a personal danger to themselves and those they care about.

Quick Tips for Parents

- Be honest and open about the disaster.
- Children need comforting and frequent reassurance that they're safe.
- Encourage children to express their feelings through talking, drawing or playing.
- Maintain daily routines as much as possible.

Preparing Children for A Disaster

Create a Family Disaster Plan and practice it so that everyone will remember what to do when a disaster does occur. Everyone in the household, including children, should play a part in the family's response and recovery efforts. Make sure your child knows what smoke detectors, fire alarms and local community warning systems (horns, sirens) sound like. Teach your child how and when to call for help. Post local emergency phone numbers by all telephones. Even very young children can be taught how and when to call for emergency assistance. Help your child memorize important family information, such as their family name, address and phone number. They should also know where to meet in case of an emergency. Younger children could carry a small index card that lists emergency information.

After the Disaster: Time for Recovery

Immediately after the disaster, try to reduce your child's fear and anxiety. Keep the family together. Calmly and firmly explain the situation. As best as you can, tell children what you know about the disaster. Explain what will happen next. Encourage children to talk. Let children talk about the disaster and ask questions. Encourage children to describe what they're feeling. Include children in recovery activities. Give children chores that are their responsibility. This will help children feel they are part of the recovery. You can help children cope by understanding what causes their anxieties and fears. Reassure them with firmness and love. Your children will realize that life will eventually return to normal.

Pre-School Age Children

Behavior such as bed-wetting, thumb sucking, baby talk, or a fear of sleeping alone may intensify in some younger children. They may complain of very real stomach cramps or headaches, and be reluctant to go to school. It's important to remember that these children are not "being bad" -- they're afraid. Reassure young children that they're safe. Get a better understanding of a child's feelings about the disaster.

Grade-School Age Children

Children this age may ask many questions about the disaster, and it's important that you try to answer them in clear and simple language. False reassurance does not help this age group. Be sure to monitor children's media viewing. Allow children in this age range to express themselves through play or drawing. And finally don't be afraid to say "I don't know."

Adolescents

Adolescents may try to down-play their worries. It is generally a good idea to keep the lines of communication open and remain honest about the financial, physical and emotional impact of the disaster on your family. When adolescents are frightened, they may express their fear through acting out or regressing to younger habits. Monitor their media exposure to the event and information they receive on the Internet. Adolescents may turn to their friends for support. Encourage friends and families to get together and discuss the event to allay fears.



For more information call the National Mental Health Association 1-800-969-NMHA (6642). Additional information can be found at www.fema.gov/kids.