

# Helping Children Cope During and After a Disaster

## A Resource for Parents and Caregivers

The amount of damage caused from a disaster can be overwhelming. The destruction of homes and separation from school, family, and friends can create a great amount of stress and anxiety for children. They may not fully understand what is going on. A child's reaction and signs of stress may vary depending on age and previous experiences and typical coping behavior with stress.

### What You Can Do to Help Children Cope with a Disaster

Set a good example by managing your own stress through healthy lifestyle choices, such as eating healthy, exercising regularly, getting plenty of sleep, and avoiding drugs and alcohol. When you are prepared, rested, and relaxed, you can respond better to unexpected events and can make decisions in the best interest of your loved ones.



The following tips can help reduce stress before, during, and after a disaster or traumatic event.

#### Before

- Assure your children that you are prepared to keep them safe.
- Review safety plans before a disaster or emergency happens. Having a plan will increase your children's confidence and help give them a sense of control.

#### During

- Stay calm and reassure your children.
- Talk to your children about what is happening in a way that they can understand. Keep it simple and appropriate for each child's age.

#### After

- Give your children opportunities to talk about what they went through. Encourage them to share concerns and ask questions.
- Encourage your children to take action directly related to the disaster so they feel a sense of control. For example, children can help others after a disaster, such as volunteering to help community or family members in a safe environment. Children should NOT participate in disaster cleanup activities for health and safety reasons.
- Because parents, teachers, and other adults see children in different situations, it is important for them to work together to share information about how each child is coping after a traumatic event.
- Help your children to have a sense of structure, which can make them feel more at ease or provide a sense of familiarity. Once schools and child care opens again, help them return to their regular activities.



## Common Reactions

The common reactions to distress will fade over time for most children. Children who were directly exposed to a disaster can become upset again and behavior related to the event may return if they see or hear reminders.

If children continue to be very upset or if their reactions hurt their relationships or schoolwork, parents may want to talk to a professional or have their children to talk to someone who specializes in children's emotional needs.

**Learn more about common reactions to distress below:**



### For Infants to 2-Year-Olds

Infants may become more cranky. They may cry more than usual or want to be held and cuddled more.



### For 3 to 6-Year-Olds

They may have toileting accidents, bed-wetting, tantrums and a hard time sleeping, or be frightened about being separated from their parents/caregivers.



### For 7 to 10-Year-Olds

Older children may feel sad, mad, or afraid that the event will happen again. Correct misinformation the child may get from others.



### For Preteens and Teenagers

Some preteens and teenagers respond to trauma by acting out or feeling afraid to leave the home. Their overwhelming emotions may lead to increased arguing and even fighting with siblings, parents/caregivers or other adults.



### For Special Needs Children

Children with physical, emotional, or intellectual limitations may have stronger reactions to a threatened or actual disaster. Children with special needs may need extra words of reassurance, more explanations about the event, and more comfort and other positive physical contact such as hugs from loved ones.

**Want to learn more?**

<https://www.cdc.gov/childrenindisasters/index.html>