

Helping Children Cope with 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. As an adult, you'll need to cope with the disaster in a way that will help children avoid developing a permanent sense of loss. It is important to give children guidance that will help them reduce their fears.

The American Red Cross provides this information to help you help your children cope. Ultimately, you should decide what's best for your children, but consider using these suggestions as guidelines.

Children and Their Response to Disaster

Children depend on daily routines: They wake up, eat breakfast, go to school, play with friends. 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. If you seem overcome with a sense of loss, a child may feel their losses more strongly.

Children's fears also may stem from their imagination, and you should take these feelings seriously. A child who feels afraid is afraid. Your words and actions can provide reassurance. When talking with your child, be sure to present a realistic picture that is both honest and manageable.

Feelings of fear are healthy and natural for adults and children. But as an adult, you need to keep control of the situation. When you're sure that danger has passed, concentrate on your child's emotional needs by asking the child what's uppermost in his or her mind. Having children participate in the family's recovery activities will help them feel that their life will return to "normal." Your response during this time may have a lasting impact.

Be aware that after a disaster, children are most afraid that--

- the event will happen again.
- Someone will be injured or killed.
- They will be separated from the family.
- They will be left alone.

Advice to Parents:

Prepare for Disaster

You can create a Family Disaster Plan by taking four simple steps. First learn what hazards exist in your community and how to prepare for each. Then meet with your family to discuss what you would do, as a group, in each situation. Next, take steps to prepare your family for disaster such as: posting emergency phone numbers, selecting an out-of-state family contact, assembling disaster supplies kits for each member of your household and installing smoke detectors on each level of your home. Finally, practice your Family Disaster Plan so that everyone will remember what to do when a disaster does occur.

- Develop and practice a Family Disaster Plan. Contact your local emergency management or civil defense office, or your local Red Cross chapter for materials that describe how your family can create a disaster plan. Everyone in the household, including children, should play a part in the family's response and recovery efforts.
- Teach your child how to recognize danger signals. Make sure your child knows what smoke detectors, fire alarms and local community warning systems (horns, sirens) sound like.
- Explain how to call for help. Teach your child how and when to call for help. Check the telephone directory for local emergency phone numbers and post these phone numbers by all telephones. If you live in a 9-1-1 service area, tell your child to call 9-1-1.
- Help your child memorize important family information. Children should memorize their family name, address and phone number. They should also know where to meet in case of an emergency. Some children may not be old enough to memorize the information. They could carry a small index card that lists emergency information to give to an adult or babysitter.

Teaching Your Children How to Call For Help

Teach your child how and when to call for help. They should call 9-1-1 if you live in a 9-1-1 service area. If not, check the telephone directory for local emergency numbers.

Even very young children can be taught how and when to call for emergency assistance.

After the Disaster: Time for Recovery

Immediately after the disaster, try to reduce your child's fear and anxiety.

Keep the family together. While you look for housing and assistance, you may want to leave your children with relatives or friends. Instead, keep the family together as much as possible and make children a part of what you are doing to get the family back on its feet. Children get anxious, and they'll worry that their parents won't return.

Calmly and firmly explain the situation. As best as you can, tell children what you know about the disaster. Explain what will happen next. For example, say, "Tonight, we will all stay together in the shelter." Get down to the child's eye level and talk to him or her.

Encourage children to talk. Let children talk about the disaster and ask questions as much as they want. Encourage children to describe what they're feeling. Listen to what they say. If possible, include the entire family in the discussion.

Include children in recovery activities. Give children chores that are their responsibility. This will help children feel they are part of the recovery. Having a task will help them understand that everything will be all right.

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. If a child does not respond to the above suggestions, seek help from a mental health specialist or a member of the clergy.

General Disaster Preparedness Information

- "Your Family Disaster Plan" (ARC 4466)
- "Your Family Disaster Supplies Kit" (ARC 4463)

General Disaster Preparedness Materials for Children

- "Disaster Preparedness Coloring Book" (ARC 2200, English, or ARC 2200S, Spanish) for use by children 3-10.
- "Adventures of the Disaster Dudes" (ARC 5024) video and Presenter's Guide for use by an adult with children in grades 4-6.

To get copies of American Red Cross Community Disaster Education materials, contact your local Red Cross chapter.

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