

Helping Children after a Natural Disaster

Natural disasters such as hurricanes, tornados and floods can be frightening, especially for children. A child's sense of security and normality is often threatened. The severity of reaction to disasters is influenced by specific risk factors. These factors include a child's exposure to the event, limited family support, personal injury, loss of a loved one, and other traumas previously experienced.

Here are general suggestions to help children cope:

- Children take cues from their parent, so acknowledge what has happened but remain as calm and reassuring as possible.
- Provide opportunities for children to share their thoughts about the disaster, listening carefully to their feelings without criticizing.
- Follow your regular routine after a disaster, allowing children to attend school and see their friends.
- Limit television and internet viewing of the event, as that can increase stress.
- Answer questions honestly, but talk about positive steps taken toward recovery.
- Some children regress to behaviors previously outgrown (e.g., bedwetting, thumb sucking). They may be clingy, have nightmares, make physical complaints, or withdraw from others. If those symptoms persist, mental health support may be needed. Your school psychologist can provide appropriate resources.