

Navigating Disasters

The majority of children experience some kind of trauma in their lives. How we manage each traumatic experience will teach our children the life skills of resiliency, strength, hope and compassion.

Children will take cues from the adults to see how worrisome the situation is. Adults need to lead with confidence and assurances that everything is being done to keep them safe. Limit exposure to scary or frightening social media images, especially for young preschool and elementary children.

Find a balance between seeking information and being present for your children. Sign up for alerts to stay informed. Continually check in with your family unit, addressing physical and emotional needs: food, water and validate emotions.

Guidelines for parenting through a disaster:

- 1. Stay calm and provide reassurance to decrease fear and worry.** Take a moment to check in with yourself; your mental, emotional and physical health is important. It is important to tell children, what is happening without overly alarming them.
- 2. Give the appropriate amount of information according to the age of each child.** Young children need basic, factual information. With teens, give more specific information and take time to answer questions while promising to keep them updated if they ask for it.
- 3. Address fears.** Children have very active imaginations which can fuel fears out of control. Ask directly if they feel afraid. Remind children that it is okay to be afraid. They do not need to be brave or tough and that it is okay to cry.
- 4. Children rely on their routines to help them cope.** Do your best to keep at least small aspects of your child's daily routine; it will give them (and you) some sense of comfort, consistency and stability.
- 5. Empower them.** Fuel their sense of belonging and significance by asking them to help you take care of important tasks. Allow them to contribute in small but meaningful ways.
- 6. Be truthful, but hopeful.** When asked, "Are we going to be okay?" respond with, "I'm not sure how it is all going to turn out, but I do know we'll get through it together." State out loud what you know for sure, what you do have influence over, and what you are grateful for.



After a disaster, it's common for children to be afraid that:

- The event will happen again.
- Someone they care about will be injured or killed.
- They will be separated from their family.
- They will be left alone.

After a disaster, parents should make every effort to reassure children that the event is over, everyone is safe, and that the family will stay together.



Common Behaviors after a Disaster. Children may:

- Go through a personality change. A quiet, obedient and caring child may become loud, noisy and aggressive or an outgoing child may become shy and afraid, increasingly clingy, and cry and whine more than usual.
- Revert to younger behavior, such as bed-wetting and thumb sucking. They may be overly upset over loss of a favorite toy, blanket, have nightmares or be afraid to sleep alone or with the light off.

Provide extra comfort, hugs, and reassuring smiles. Remember connection is key. Do not be alarmed about their regression; this too shall pass.

CHILDREN'S PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS

Some children may not exhibit signs of distress for weeks to months after the disaster, while some may never show such signs. It is important for parents to closely observe children's behavior. By recognizing problems quickly, parents can access resources for their child to receive extra counseling or attention.

Some activities to consider:

- Draw or paint pictures that show their thoughts and feelings about the event and their experience during and after.
- Have children write a silly rhyme, song or story about the frightening event. Make sure to end with: *and now we are all safe and sound.*

Going Deeper

During times of extreme stress, parents are much more prone to being impatient and seeking a "just-do-what-I-tell-you" attitude with their children. When we reach those moments of frustration and overwhelm, we use phrases like:

"Just sit and be quiet!"
"I'm not going to tell you again!"
"I'm warning you!", "One!...Two!...Three!"
"*That* is not important right now, just let me focus!"

This is the perfect time to recognize that we are the ones who need to cool down the most (please refer to the Positive Time-Out tip sheet). We are often escalating the tension and prolonging the conflict through angry, shaming outbursts.

What can we do instead?

When we find ourselves locked in a heated battle heading towards a hurtful outcome, this is a great time to take the opportunity to model taking responsibility for yourself.

Stop talking, tune in and ask:

"How is my breathing and my heart rate?"
"Is there tension in my body?"
"Am I scrambling for control instead of looking for a win-win solution?"
"Is this something I can come back to later when emotions have cooled?"

Then, take three deep breaths, get a glass of water, step away, get a fresh perspective, phone a friend, and seek support. Return when you feel more in control and calm.

Be kind to yourselves. You are navigating parenting through a disaster. Hold yourself and your family with compassion. Children are forgiving and just want to feel belonging and significance especially in uncertain, chaotic times. This is the best thing you can do for yourself and your family.

What is happening in their brain (and ours!)



Stressful times bring on strong emotions. Brain research reveals that when we experience strong emotions, we are operating from the brain's limbic system. This is the place where fight or flight instincts take over.

Two chemicals in our brain called cortisol and adrenaline flood our system. The ability to listen to others, to be socially appropriate, see another's perspective and problem solve is NOT available. Once strong feelings pass, we can operate from our brain's prefrontal cortex which allows us to be appropriate, apologize, problem solve, cooperate and think rationally.

Similarly, there are two chemicals, dopamine and oxytocin, in our brains that bring us back to our prefrontal cortex (thinking brain). Actions to take to produce and release these in our brains are: hugs, seeking connection, accomplishing tasks, helping others, and asking for help are a few meaningful actions.

Expect meltdowns

It's too overwhelming for children to cry about the disaster at hand, even after time has passed. Instead, small things are used as a way to release pent up emotions. Also, children may work to gain control when life feels so uncertain by having meltdowns and/or creating power struggles.

What can you do to help?

- View these meltdowns as both necessary and therapeutic.
- Provide a safe place to let these emotions run their course.
- Say very little. Do not get hooked in the verbal power struggle. Stay cool, calm and collected.
- Keep boundaries clear, yet avoid punishment. They have already been punished by this traumatic event; empathize and be present for them.
- When the meltdown has passed, reconnection can happen. Hugs, conversation, and co-creating solutions are now possible.



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