

# Disaster Preparedness

## *Children Need Help Coping with Disaster*

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Natural disasters may cause stress for people of all ages, but adults need to realize children may need extra help in coping with a natural disaster.

A child's reaction to a disaster will vary depending on age, maturity, and previous experience. Many children express common fears during or after a disaster: darkness, abandonment, and death. Children have trouble understanding what the disaster is and why it happens.

When children experience a natural disaster, parents and other adults should encourage them to express their feelings. They may choose to express their feelings through talking or playing.

Children often have many questions following a disaster. Take time to answer their questions but do so with simple, accurate answers. Also take time to talk to children about your own feelings.

Children may feel at fault for the disaster. Parents should reassure them that they are not responsible for what occurred. They may also feel abandoned or neglected by parents who are busy cleaning and rebuilding after the disaster. Close contact assures these children that you are there for them and will not abandon them. Spending extra time putting children to bed at night can help ease their concerns.

Other unusual behaviors a child may exhibit include hitting and kicking in anger or frustration, becoming quiet and withdrawn, retreating to behaviors shown at a younger age, exhibiting symptoms of illness, or refusing to be out a parent's sight.

When children exhibit such behaviors, they are craving attention. Parents need to

continually respond to their needs and repeatedly assure them they are loved and their feelings are important.

Adults need to remember several facts:

- Children do not have mature reasoning skills.
- Children lack an accurate understanding of cause and effect.
- Children have not had the chance to become skilled at handling stress.
- Children need to discuss stress issues honestly and at their level of understanding.
- Children need help to prevent pressures from building.
- If the stress reaches a crisis level in the child, seek help from professional counselors.

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