

Tips for Talking to Children & Youth About the Oil Spill Disaster

Interventions at Home for Preschoolers to Adolescents



The stress and impact of the oil spill can affect children as much as adults. Some children may be affected without anyone knowing. Without meaning to, parents may make a child feel that it is not all right to talk about the experience. This may cause confusion, self-doubt, and feelings of helplessness in a child. A child needs to hear that many feelings are normal during and after an event. Knowing this helps a child cope with the experience.

Children and youth may show signs of stress due to the losses and change caused by the oil spill in the Gulf Coast. Signs may include sadness, tantrums, aggressive or withdrawn behavior, and a return to outgrown behavior. Signs may also include stomach aches and headaches, and an ongoing desire to stay home from school or away from friends. These signs are normal and usually do not last long. You can help your child with the following suggestions.

- Always listen to your child's telling of the experience
- Encourage your child to express feelings through talk and play
- Provide home chores and activities that are structured, but not too demanding
- Explain how people are helping to respond to the oil spill and how communities are impacted by this disaster

Preschooler

- Stick to regular family routines
- Make an extra effort to provide comfort and support
- Avoid separation when possible
- Allow your child to sleep in the parents' room for a limited time
- Encourage your child to express feelings through play, drawing, puppet shows, and storytelling
- Limit media exposure

Elementary Age Children

- Provide extra attention
- Set gentle but firm limits for acting out behavior

Preadolescents and Adolescents

- Provide extra attention
- Be there to listen to your child, but do not force talk about feelings
- Encourage discussion of experiences among peers
- Urge your child to take part in physical activities
- Support the return to regular activities when possible
- Promote healthy eating and exercise habits
- Limit exposure to media



Hotlines

Oil Spill Distress Helpline

Toll-Free: 1-800-985-5990

National Domestic Violence Hotline

Toll-Free: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

TTY: 1-800-787-3224

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Toll-Free: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (4889)

Web Site: <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

Treatment Locator

SAMHSA Treatment Referral Helpline

Toll-Free: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

TTY: 1-800-487-4TTY (4889)

Web Site: <http://www.samhsa.gov/treatment/>

Information Clearinghouse

SAMHSA Health Information Network

Toll-Free: 1-877-726-4727

TTY: 1-800-487-4TTY (4889)

Web Site: <http://www.samhsa.gov/shin>

Helpful Resources

SAMHSA Disaster Technical Assistance Center (DTAC)

Toll-Free: 1-800-308-3515

E-Mail: DTAC@samhsa.hhs.gov

Web Site: <http://www.samhsa.gov/dtac/>

For specific State referral information, please contact SAMHSA DTAC.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Web Site: <http://www.nctsn.net>

Workplace Helpline

Toll-Free: 1-800-967-5752

Web Site: <http://www.workplace.samhsa.gov/>

Note: Inclusion of a resource in this fact sheet does not imply endorsement by the Center for Mental Health Services, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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Remember that in order to help your child, it is important that you take care of yourself. Make sure that you are taking the time to deal with your own stress and reactions to this disaster. You do not have to “fix” how your child feels. Try to help your child understand and cope with the Gulf Coast disaster. Healing takes time for most children. Some children may need professional help. If signs of stress do not subside, or if they get worse, consider consulting a mental health professional trained in working with children.

