

Pointers For Parents

When Disaster Strikes: Helping Kids In The Aftermath

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(NAPSA)—Hurricanes, torna-

does, wildfires, earthquakes, mass violence, or acts of terrorism—disasters can happen at any time, but you can help your kids deal with them. While adults focus on preparing for potential threats or trying to restore safety and resume a normal life in the aftermath, kids often try to make sense of what may seem utterly senseless. The trauma of a disaster or other type of emergency can bring up different feelings and emotions; it can also be a teachable moment for children and their families to come together to talk and support each other.

For adults, it's important to recognize the effect that traumatic events can have on mood, stress level, job attendance and performance, and routine. The disruption caused by natural and man-made disasters is common and often difficult to manage. Adults may try to cope with alcohol, by isolating themselves or by exhibiting outbursts of anger, which may be uncharacteristic. Because children often model adult behavior, self-care is especially important. Finding healthy ways to get through difficult, stressful experiences can set the stage for healthy dialogue and support for the whole family.

There are some key tips for parents, teachers and other adults on how to approach the conversation:

- **Talk.** It can be difficult to talk about what's happening but kids need to share what they're feeling, thinking, seeing and hearing. Children need to know there are no bad emotions and that it's normal to have a range of reactions. They may also bring up fears or concerns that are unrelated to the crisis. Staying connected with open communication will provide opportunity for deeper understanding and can help identify a need for extra reassurance and support.

- **Be honest.** While children look to adults for answers, during times of crisis it can be difficult to know what's happening and when. It's important to be honest and open, while being reassuring and speaking at a level that the child can understand.

- **Balance with the positive.** While focusing on the loss, grief and distress experienced in times of crisis is normal in the aftermath, it will be beneficial to help



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After a disaster or crisis, kids need to share what they are feeling, thinking, seeing and hearing. Staying connected with open communication will provide an opportunity for deeper understanding and healing.

children also identify and see the good that is happening around them. Emergency responders, volunteers and others in the community who mobilize are great examples of resilience and strength and can provide a sense of hope and healing.

- **Return to routine.** Getting back to a schedule, in which kids can engage with friends, teachers and other mentors, can be very helpful. People they interact with on a daily basis are a support network, so maintaining those connections and daily activities can keep children feeling connected and safe in familiar surroundings.

- **Limit media exposure.** It's normal to want lots of information during and after a disaster. Staying tuned in to the latest news can help to bring back a sense of control and awareness but it can also be a little overwhelming. For parents, it's especially important to limit exposure and to be present when kids are watching, listening or reading about an event. News coverage can often bring about new questions for children, so being there to discuss what's happening will be important.

- **Reinforce peace and tolerance.** Things can be chaotic during and after a crisis. While the news media or people interviewed may highlight or blame a particular ethnic or cultural group's actions, it is important to keep a peaceful and inclusive perspective with kids. Be sensitive to cultural, ethnic, religious or other experiences, as they can also influence

how people respond differently in times of crisis.

- **Make a crisis plan.** Times of disaster or emergency can highlight what people might do differently or better to stay connected, respond together and to feel prepared for the future. Developing a crisis plan for your family gives everyone something to do and participate in and will help you all feel on the same page about each person's role and responsibility. Kids should also be encouraged to discuss their safety concerns, including those they may have for extended family, friends and family pets.

Because each stage of a child's development offers new opportunities to learn and process stressful events, it's important to know what's manageable for a child at a specific age. To help, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) offers age-specific information on how kids respond to trauma and tips on how to talk about what's happening during a crisis. "Tips for Talking With and Helping Children and Youth Cope After a Disaster or Traumatic Event: A Guide for Parents, Caregivers, and Teachers" is at <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/Tips-for-Talking-With-and-Helping-Children-and-Youth-Cope-After-a-Disaster-or-Traumatic-Event-A-Guide-for-Parents-Caregivers-and-Teachers/SMA-12-4732>.

Kids are resilient but some may need a little extra support to navigate through a difficult disaster or crisis. If kids are struggling to sleep, aren't connecting with friends, having a difficult time talking about what they're feeling or have a sudden shift with their grades at school, the trauma of what's happened may require more attention. Seeking assistance from a counselor or mental health professional may be helpful.

"Crises can take a heavy toll on people and communities, including on their emotional health and well-being," explained Kana Enomoto, SAMHSA's acting administrator. "Although most people bounce back, others may need extra assistance to cope and recover." This is true for children, just as it is for adults.

To learn more about some of the warning signs of emotional distress, visit www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline/warning-signs-risk-factors. To help you find a nearby mental health provider, SAMHSA has a Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator at <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>.