

Promoting the Health and Well-Being of Families During Difficult Times

Understanding the Impact of Disasters on the Lives of Children and Youth

Lynne M. Borden

Extension Specialist and Associate Professor,

The University of Arizona, Norton School of Family and Consumer Sciences

The purpose of this fact sheet is to offer parents and others who work with children and youth an understanding of the impact of a natural disaster, such as a drought, on the lives of young people. As discussed in the *Supporting Families Following a Disaster* introductory fact sheet, disasters can be immediate, as with a tornado, or long-term as with the effects of a drought. Disasters can also be natural weather-related disasters or human-made disasters such as airplane crashes, or the collapse of bridges or building. This fact sheet offers both parents and others information that can be used to first understand the effect of stress on the lives of young people and then to provide ways to support them during difficult times.

How Do Disasters Affect Young People?

Disasters, whether natural or human-made, often leave today's families facing difficult times due to loss of parental employment, relocation, divorce, death of a family member and other catastrophic events that create stress for all members of the family. For example, ranching and farming families find their lives greatly influenced by weather-related events such as floods, fires, droughts and blizzards. These events can often cause short-term disruptions within the family or they can be long-term and change the lives of family members dramatically. As noted in one of the other Fact Sheets in this series entitled, *Promoting the Health and Well Being of Families During Difficult Times: Supporting Families Following a Disaster*, it is the severity of the experience that is related to overall levels of ill-effects (Yule, 1993) for the family members involved. Understanding the emotional reactions of children and young people to a disaster such as a fire, drought, or hurricane is important when trying to provide support. The American Academy of Pediatrics Work Group on Disasters (1995) suggests that young people experience disasters depending on several factors:

- Proximity to the impact zone;
- Awareness of the disaster;
- Physical injury sustained;
- Amount of disability;
- Witnessing of injury or death of family member or friend;
- Perceived or actual life threat;
- Duration of life disruptions;
- Family and personal property loss;
- Parental reactions and extent of familial disruption;
- Child's pre-disaster state; and
- Probability of recurrence.

The American Academy of Pediatrics Work Group on Disasters (1995) further suggests that there are five primary responses seen in children resulting from loss, exposure to trauma, and disruption of routine:

- Increased dependency on parents or guardians;
- Nightmares;
- Regression in developmental achievements;
- Specific fears about reminders of the disasters; and
- Demonstration of the disaster via posttraumatic play and reenactments.

The Work Group also identified possible responses of children and young people by specific age groups.

Toddlers and Preschoolers

- Reaction reflects that of parents;
- Regressive behaviors (e.g., returned to thumb sucking);
- Decreased appetite;
- Vomiting, constipation, diarrhea;
- Sleep disorders (insomnia, nightmares);
- Tics, stuttering, muteness;
- Clinging;
- Reenactment via play;
- Exaggerated startle response;
- Irritability; and
- Posttraumatic stress disorder.

School-Age Children

- Stronger effects than other age-groups;
- Fear, anxiety;
- Increased hostility with siblings;
- Physical complaints;
- Sleep disorders;
- School problems;
- Social withdrawal;
- Reenactment via play;
- Apathy;
- Posttraumatic stress disorder; and
- Decreased interest in peers, hobbies, school.

Preadolescents

- Increased hostility with siblings;
- Physical complaints;
- Eating disorders;
- Sleep disorders;
- Decreased interest in peers, hobbies, school;
- Rebellion;

- Refusal to do chores;
- Interpersonal difficulties; and
- Posttraumatic stress disorder.

Adolescents

- Decreased interest in social activities, peers, hobbies, school;
- Anhedonia (an inability to experience pleasure);
- Decline in responsible behaviors;
- Rebellion, behavior problems;
- Physical complaints;
- Sleep disorders;
- Eating disorders;
- Change in Physical activities;
- Confusion;
- Lack of concentration;
- Risk-taking behaviors; and
- Posttraumatic stress disorder

The after-effects of a disaster can clearly disrupt the lives of children and young people, as illustrated by the above lists of possible responses by age group. The disruptions and the accumulation of stressors that occur in their lives due to the disaster, regardless of type or duration of the disaster, are what determine the level of negative effects in the lives of children.

When to Get Help

The lists above provide an overview of many typical responses to stress. However there are times when responses become more intense. Children and young people should be referred to a mental health professional for evaluation if:

- Symptoms signal a very unusual change in behavior or appearance and persist for more than 2 weeks;
- Several different kinds of symptoms are seen (e.g., appears sad, complains of headaches, and sleeps in class);
- Symptoms are seen in different settings (e.g., in different classes, outside of school, at home, with peers);
- The child threatens or actually tries to harm him or herself or
- The child shows signs of abuse or neglect.

It is important to note that a disaster, no matter the type or duration, can dramatically influence the lives of all members of the family, even those who may seem too young to worry or notice. In fact, children and young people often find that their own lives have changed dramatically. For example, they may not have the same level of parental support available to them, as their parents are often less available both physically and emotionally due to their need to cope with the disaster. Further, the roles and routines within the family may no longer be the same. Mothers may have to return to work, families may have to relocate, familiar items and places may no longer be available, and family finances may change dramatically.

These changes present a challenge for the children and young people within the family, as there is often a sense of lost reliability, cohesion, and predictability that can be distressing to children and youth. Understanding a child's possible reaction to stress created by a disaster is the first step in providing support both within the family and, in certain cases, the support of mental health providers.

Internet Resources

Children's Anger and Tantrums Fact Sheet: Children's anger fact sheet includes causes of anger and management tips for parents. <http://www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/consumer/10248.html>

Talking to Children about Tough Times, such as Natural Disasters: What to say in differential age sensitive ways. <http://www.ext.nodak.edu/extpubs/yf/famsci/fs546w.htm>

Youth and Suicide Fact Sheet: Fact sheet on youth and suicide; includes statistics, myths and facts about suicide, risk factors for suicide, guidelines on how to help suicidal youth, and warning signs to look for. <http://www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/consumer/10213.html>

Coping with Traumatic Events: This website, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, offers information for parents, teachers, and special populations on how to work with children and families during these difficult times. <http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs/managinganxiety/tips.asp>

Supporting Families Following a Disaster: Series of fact sheets covering special needs of families during difficult times. http://ag.arizona.edu/fcs/supporting_families/

References

American Academy of Pediatrics Work Group on Disasters. (1995). *Psychological Issues for Children in Disasters: A Guide for the Primary Care Physician*. Washington D. C.: National Mental Health Services Exchange Network.

Ebata, A. T., Borden, L. M. (1995). *Children, stress and natural disasters: A guide for teachers and school activities for children*. Champaign-Urbana, IL: University of Illinois.

Saylor, D. F. (1993). *Children and disasters*. New York, NY: Plenum Press.

La Greca, A. M., Silverman, W. K. , Vernberg, E. M. & Roberts, M. C. (2002). *Helping children cope with disasters and terrorism*. Washington, D. C.: American Psychological Association.