

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

Supporting Children and Youth Following a Disaster

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The purpose of this fact sheet is to provide families with ways to support children during times of stress. Many children are exposed to stressful life events including such normal occurrences as taking a test or having a friend move away. However, there are times when children experience an event, such as a disaster, that can disrupt their daily lives and create significant stress. These events often require children to cope with more stress than they may be prepared to handle. It is during these stressful times that children are most in need of support, which parents and other caring adults such as teachers, relatives, and neighbors can provide.

Preparing Children for Stress

Young people are often faced with the difficult challenge of coping with stressful events such as a disaster (accidents, flood, drought, fire, and so on). These events may last only minutes or, in some cases, may continue for days and weeks as in the case of floods, droughts, and fires. It is essential during these stressful times that children receive support to cope with the effects of these events. Providing much needed support during these stressful times increases their ability to cope with the stress and to build important coping strategies. The National Network for Child Care suggests in a recent publication, *Helping Children Cope with Stress*, that there are several factors that support children and create a safety net for them during stressful times.

- A healthy relationship with at least one parent or close adult
- Well-developed social skills
- Well-developed problem-solving skills
- Ability to act independently
- A sense of purpose
- At least one coping strategy
- A sense of positive self-esteem and personal responsibility
- Religious commitment
- Ability to focus attention
- Special interests and hobbies

Supporting Children During Stressful Situations

Parents, teachers, relatives and others can assist children in creating opportunities to build these factors in their lives. However, during a crisis when children may be feeling overwhelmed by life events such as a drought, fire, tornado, acts of terrorism or other disasters, adults can provide much needed support.

The adults in the lives of these children can assist them by providing a sense of safety, routine, security, and fulfillment. They need a place where they know that they and their feelings are important to others. Parents, teachers, and other caring adults can provide this type of environment by doing the following:

- Being willing to listen and respond to verbal and nonverbal cues;
- Noticing and acknowledging things about the child, keeping track of and commenting on what's going on in their lives;
- Giving children extra reassurance, support, and encouragement;
- Providing structure, stability, and predictability by having predictable routines, clear expectations, consistent rules, and immediate feedback.

It is quite natural during a stressful time for young people to feel angry, sad, or frightened. Talking about these feelings might make them feel better. There are ways to provide much needed support at home, school, or through other community organizations. Most communities can provide support through faith-based organizations, after school care, youth organizations such as 4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs and others. Such organizations can support children by:

- Providing activities that encourage children to share experiences and express feelings of fear or concern;
- Developing projects that provide an understanding of causes and consequences of disasters;
- Offering children the opportunity to develop a sense of competence, confidence, and control in being able to handle future stressful experiences;
- Encouraging children and youth to become involved in service projects within the community that offer them the opportunity to contribute to their family, school and community.

Activities for Children

The Marin County Community Mental Health Services and Santa Cruz County Mental Health suggest the following activities (*adapted from Children, Stress, and Natural Disasters: School Activities for Children*):

Preschool and Elementary School Activities

1. Making toys and materials that encourage play reenactment of children's experiences and observations during a disaster can be helpful in better understanding the experiences. These might include trucks, cars, and other machines that represent fire engines, rescue trucks, dump trucks, bulldozers, ambulances, helicopters and others. In addition, access to puppets or dolls can also help children express their feelings concerning what has occurred. (Preschool, early elementary)
2. Physical activity can also be a good way for children and adults to relieve tension and anxiety. Physical contact during stressful times can provide a sense of security. Games that

include positive physical contact such as in *Ring Around the Rosie*, *London Bridge*, and *Duck, Duck, Goose* may be helpful. (Preschool, Early Elementary)

3. Having children draw a picture about a disaster is a good way to offer them a way to express their feelings. You can ask children to draw whatever comes to their minds, or you can give them a question or topic to draw about. Having children talk about their pictures either individually or with a group may allow them to express their feelings more clearly in the future. The sharing of their pictures may also help children realize that they are not the only ones who are feeling sad, scared, and angry or who are experiencing other feelings. (Preschool, Early Elementary)
4. Students can draw, write, or talk about the things that are currently happening due to the disaster, what they best remember, responding to questions or topics such as:
 - What happened during the storm?
 - How do you help/did you help during the disaster?
 - What good or positive thing happened because of the disaster?
 - Did you learn anything from what happened to you?

Although group discussions are a good way for validating children's feelings about their experiences, it is important to end the discussion on a positive note by focusing on things that promote a sense of security, mastery, or preparedness. It may be helpful to identify positive outcomes such as:

- Feeling closer to family and friends
 - Meeting new friends or caring adults
 - Learning new skills or getting a sense of responsibility, strength, or mastery
 - Having the community pull together to deal with the crisis
 - Seeing that people want to help
5. Encourage activities that can offer children the opportunity to organize or build projects (scrapbooks, replicas, etc.) to give them a sense of mastery and a chance to organize what may be a chaotic and confusing event. (Elementary)

Middle School, Junior High and High School Activities

1. Encourage young people to describe and express their feelings through art, music, poetry, journal writing, and by producing a play or a video. These works can be collected and shared with others.
2. Group discussions designed to allow students to express their feelings, to understand and be reassured that many of their reactions are normal and not "crazy", will assist them in understanding what the disaster means. It is important to focus both on the positive as well as the negative outcomes, and what can be learned from their experiences.

It is essential during this stressful time that young people have the opportunity to feel that there is a place that is safe and secure, free from the stress, fears, and terrors associated with the event. They will need to have people around them that can listen and validate their stories. It is important that young people have the opportunity to tell the story; they may need to tell the story over and over. During the recovery process all young people will need to be able once again to predict and prepare for the future (NEA, 2003).

Although, each child may experience the disaster in a different way and express these emotions differently, there are times when a child or young person might benefit from the support of a qualified professional for additional support and intervention. For further information please refer to the fact sheet, *Understanding the Impact of Disasters on the Lives of Children and Youth*.

Internet Resources:

Helping Children Cope: Information on helping children cope during stressful times, includes information on family communication.

<http://www.extension.uiuc.edu/ruralroute/helpingchildrencope.pdf>

Supporting Distressed Young People Fact Sheet: Tips on how to help young people deal with stress and what to expect.

<http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/familydevelopment/DE2786.html>

How You Can Help Mom or Dad: Information for children on ways they can help their parents in stressful times.

<http://www.extension.uiuc.edu/ruralroute/howyoucanhelpmomordad.pdf>

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

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