

Tips for Helping Preschool-Age Children After Disasters

Reactions/Behavior	Responses	Examples of things to do and say
<p>Helplessness and Passivity: Young children know they can't protect themselves. In a disaster they feel even more helpless. They want to know their parents will keep them safe. They might express this by being unusually quiet or agitated.</p>	<p>► Provide comfort, rest, food, water, and opportunities for play and drawing. ► Provide ways to turn spontaneous drawing or playing from traumatic events to include something that would make them feel safer or better.</p> <p>► Reassure your child that you and other grownups will protect them.</p>	<p>► Give your child more hugs, hand holding, or time in your lap. ► Make sure there is a special safe area for your child to play with proper supervision. ► In play, a four year old keeps having the blocks knocked down by hurricane winds. Asked, "Can you make it safe from the winds?" the child quickly builds a double block thick wall and says, "Winds won't get us now." A parent might respond with, "That wall sure is strong" and explain, "We're doing a lot of things to keep us safe."</p>
<p>General Fearfulness: Young children may become more afraid of being alone, being in the bathroom, going to sleep, or otherwise separated from parents. Children want to believe that their parents can protect them in all situations and that other grownups, such as teachers or police officers, are there to help them.</p>	<p>► Be as calm as you can with your child. Try not to voice your own fears in front of your child. ► Help children regain confidence that you aren't leaving them and that you can protect them. ► Remind them that there are people working to keep families safe, and that your family can get more help if you need to. ► If you leave, reassure your children you will be back. Tell them a realistic time in words they understand, and be back on time. ► Give your child ways to communicate their fears to you.</p> <p>► Give simple, repeated explanations as needed, even every day. Make sure they understand the words you are using. ► Find out what other words or explanations they have heard and clarify inaccuracies. ► If you are at some distance from the danger, it is important to tell your child that the danger is not near you.</p>	<p>► Be aware when you are on the phone or talking to others, that your child does not overhear you expressing fear. ► Say things such as, "We are safe from the hurricane now, and people are working hard to make sure we are okay." ► Say, "If you start feeling more scared, come and take my hand. Then I'll know you need to tell me something."</p>
<p>Confusion about the danger being over: Young children can overhear things from adults and older children, or see things on TV or just imagine that it is happening all over again. They believe the danger is closer to home, even if it happened further away.</p>		<p>► Continue to explain to your child that the hurricane has passed and that you are away from the flooded area ► Draw, or show on a map, how far away you are from the disaster area, and that where you are is safe. "See? The hurricane was way over there, and we're way over here in this safe place."</p>

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Not talking: Being silent or having difficulty saying what is bothering them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Put common feelings of children into words, such as anger, sadness, and worry about the safety of parents, friends and siblings. ► Do not force them to talk, but let them know they can talk to you any time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Draw simple "happy faces" for different feelings on paper plates. Tell a brief story about each one, such as, "Remember when the water came into the house and had a worried face like this?" ► Say something like, "Children can feel really sad when their home is damaged." ► Provide art or play materials to help them express themselves. Then use feeling words to check out how they felt. "This is a really scary picture. Were you scared when you saw the water?" ► "Even though it's raining, that doesn't mean the hurricane is happening again. A rainstorm is smaller and can't wreck stuff like a hurricane can." ► Keep your child from seeing television, radio, and computer images of the disaster that can trigger fears of it happening again."
Fears the disaster will return: When having reminders--seeing, hearing, or otherwise sensing something that reminds them of the disaster.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Explain the difference between the event and reminders of the event. ► Protect children from things that will remind them as best you can. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Provide calming activities before bedtime. Tell a favorite story with a comforting theme. ► At bedtime say, "You can sleep with us tonight, but tomorrow you'll sleep in your own bed." ► "Bad dreams come from our thoughts inside about being scared, not from real things happening." ► If your child starts bedwetting, change her clothes and linens without comment. Don't let anyone criticize or shame the child by saying, "You're such a baby."
Sleep problems: fear of being alone at night, sleeping alone, waking up afraid, having bad dreams.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Reassure your child that s/he is safe. Spend extra quiet time together at bedtime. ► Let the child sleep with a dim light on, or sleep with you for a limited time. ► Some might understand an explanation of the difference between dreams and real life. ► Remain neutral or matter-of-fact, as best you can, as these may continue a while after the disaster. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Allow children to participate in cultural and religious grieving rituals. ► Help them find their own way to say goodbye by drawing a happy memory or lighting a candle or saying a prayer for them. ► "No, Pepper won't be back, but we can think about him and talk about him and remember what a silly doggy he was." ► "The firefighter said no one could save Pepper and it wasn't your fault. I know you miss him very much."
Returning to earlier behaviors: Thumb sucking, bedwetting, baby-talk, needing to be in your lap		
Not understanding about death: Preschool age children don't understand that death is not reversible. They have "magical thinking" and might believe their thoughts caused the death. The loss of a pet may be very hard on a child.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Give age-appropriate consistent explanation--that does not give false hopes--about the reality of death. ► Don't minimize their feelings over a loss of a pet or a special toy. ► Take cues from what your child seems to want to know. Answer simply and ask if he has any more questions. 	

Tips for Helping School-Age Children After Disasters

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<u>Confusion about what happened</u>	<p>► Give clear explanations of what happened whenever your child asks. Avoid details that would scare your child. Correct any information that your child is unclear or confused about regarding if there is a present danger. ► Remind children that there are people working to keep families safe and that your family can get more help if needed. ► Let your children know what they can expect to happen next.</p>	<p>► “I know other kids said that more hurricanes are coming, but we are now in a place that is safer from hurricanes.” ► Continue to answer questions your children have (without getting irritable) and to reassure them the family is safe. ► Tell them what’s happening, especially about issues regarding school and where they will be living.</p>
<u>Feelings of being responsible: School-age children may have concerns that they were somehow at fault, or should have been able to change what happened. They may hesitate to voice their concerns in front of others.</u>	<p>► Provide opportunities for children to voice their concerns to you. ► Offer reassurance and tell them why it was not their fault.</p>	<p>► Take your child aside. Explain that, “After a disaster like this, lots of kids—and parents too—keep thinking ‘What could I have done differently?’ or ‘I should have been able to do something.’ That doesn’t mean they were at fault.” ► “Remember? The firefighter said no one could save Pepper and it wasn’t your fault.”</p>
<u>Fears of recurrence of the event and reactions to reminders</u>	<p>► Help child to identify reminders (people, places, sounds, smells, feelings, time of day) and to clarify the difference between the event and the reminders that occur after it. ► Reassure them, as often as they need, that they are safe. ► Protect children from seeing media coverage of the event as it can trigger fears of the disaster happening again.</p>	<p>► When they recognize that they are being reminded, say, “Try to think to yourself, ‘I am upset because I am being reminded of the hurricane because it is raining, but now there is no hurricane and I am safe.’” ► “I think we need to take a break from the TV right now.”</p>
<u>Retelling the event or playing out the event over and over</u>	<p>► Permit the child to talk and act out these reactions. Let them know that this is normal. ► Encourage positive problem-solving in play or drawing.</p>	<p>► “I notice you’re drawing a lot of pictures of what happened. Did you know that many children do that?” ► “It might help to draw about how you would like your school to be rebuilt to make it safer.”</p>

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<u>Fear of being overwhelmed by their feelings</u>	► Provide a safe place for them to express their fears, anger, sadness, etc. Allow children to cry or be sad; don't expect them to be brave or tough.	► "When scary things happen, people have strong feelings, like being mad at everyone or being very sad. Would you like to sit here with a blanket until you're feeling better?"
<u>Sleep problems, including bad dreams, fear of sleeping alone, demanding to sleep with parents.</u>	► Let your child tell you about the bad dream. Explain that bad dreams are normal and they will go away. Do not ask the child to go into too many details of the bad dream.	► "That was a scary dream. Let's think about some good things you can dream about and I'll rub your back until you fall asleep."
<u>Concerns about the safety of themselves and others.</u>	► Help them to share their worries and give them realistic information.	► Create a "worry box" where children can write out their worries and place them in the box. Set a time to look these over, problem-solve, and come up with answers to the worries.
<u>Altered behavior: Unusually aggressive or restless behavior.</u>	► Encourage the child to engage in recreational activities and exercise as an outlet for feelings and frustration.	► "I know you didn't mean to slam that door. It must be hard to feel so angry." ► "How about if we take a walk? Sometimes getting our bodies moving helps with strong feelings."
<u>Somatic complaints: Headaches, stomachaches, muscle aches for which there seem to be no reason.</u>	► Find out if there is a medical reason. If not, provide comfort and assurance that this is normal. ► Be matter-of-fact with your child; giving these non-medical complaints too much attention may increase them.	► Make sure the child gets enough sleep, eats well, drinks plenty of water, and gets enough exercise. ► "How about sitting over there? When you feel better, let me know and we can play cards."
<u>Closely watching a parent's responses and recovery; not wanting to disturb parent with their own worries.</u>	► Give children opportunities to talk about their feelings as well as your own. ► Remain as calm as you can, so as not to increase your child's worries.	► "Yes, my ankle is broken, but it feels better since the paramedics wrapped it. I bet it was scary seeing me hurt, wasn't it?"
<u>Concern for other victims and families.</u>	► Encourage constructive activities on behalf of others, but do not burden with undo responsibility.	► Help children identify projects that are age-appropriate and meaningful (e.g., clearing rubble from school grounds, collecting money or supplies for those in need).

Tips for Helping Adolescents After Disasters

Reactions	Responses	Examples of things to do and say
Detachment, shame, and guilt	<p>► Provide a safe time to discuss with your teen the events and their feelings. ► Emphasize that these feelings are common, and correct excessive self-blame with realistic explanations of what actually could have been done.</p>	<p>► “Many kids—and adults—feel like you do, angry and blaming themselves that they couldn’t do more. You’re not at fault—remember, even the firefighters said there was nothing more we could have done.”</p>
Self-consciousness about their fears, sense of vulnerability, fear of being labeled abnormal	<p>► Help teens understand that these feelings are common. ► Encourage relationships with family and peers for needed support during the recovery period.</p>	<p>► “I was feeling the same thing. Scared and helpless. Most people feel like this when a disaster happens, even if they look calm on the outside.” ► “My cell phone is working again, why don’t you see if you can get a hold of Pete to see how he’s doing.” ► “And thanks for playing the game with your little sister. She’s much better now.”</p>
Acting out behavior; using alcohol and drugs, sexual acting out, accident-prone behavior.	<p>► Help teens understand that acting out behavior is a dangerous way to express strong feelings (like anger) over what happened. ► Limit access to alcohol and drugs. ► Talk about the danger of high-risk sexual activity. ► On a time-limited basis, have them let you know where they are going and what they’re planning to do.</p>	<p>► “Many teens—and some adults—feel out of control and angry after a disaster like this. They think drinking or taking drugs will help somehow. It’s very normal to feel that way—but it’s not a good idea to act on it.” ► “It’s important during these times that I know where you are and how to contact you.” Assure them that this extra checking-in is temporary, just until things have stabilized.</p>
Fears of recurrence and reactions to reminders	<p>► Help to identify different reminders (people, places, sounds, smells, feelings, time of day) and to clarify the difference between the event and the reminders that occur after it. ► Explain to teens that media coverage of the disaster can trigger fears of it happening again.</p>	<p>► “When you’re reminded, you might try saying to yourself, ‘I am upset now because I am being reminded, but it is different now because there is no hurricane and I am safe.’” ► Suggest “Watching the news reports could make it worse, because they are playing the same images over and over. How about turning it off now?”</p>

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<u>Abrupt shifts in interpersonal relationships: Teens may pull away from parents, family, and even from peers; they may respond strongly to parent's reactions in the crisis.</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Explain that the strain on relationships is expectable. Emphasize that we need family and friends for support during the recovery period. ► Encourage tolerance for different family member's courses to recovery. ► Accept responsibility for your own feelings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Spend more time talking as a family about how everyone is doing. Say, "You know, the fact that we're crabby with each other is completely normal, given what we've been through. I think we're handling things amazingly. It's a good thing we have each other." ► You might say, "I appreciate your being calm when your brother was screaming last night. I know he woke you up too." ► "I want to apologize for being irritable with you yesterday. I am going to work harder to stay calm myself."
<u>Radical changes in attitude</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Explain that changes in people's attitudes after a disaster are common, but will return back to normal over time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► "We are all under great stress. When people's lives are disrupted this way, we all feel more scared, angry—even full of revenge. It might not seem like it, but we all will feel better when we get back to a more structured routine."
<u>Wanting premature entrance into adulthood: (e.g., wanting to leave school, get married)</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Encourage postponing major life decisions. Find other ways to make the adolescent feel more in control over things. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► "I know you're thinking about quitting school and getting a job to help out. But it's important not to make big decisions right now. A crisis time is not a great time to make major changes."
<u>Concern for other victims and families</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Encourage constructive activities on behalf of others, but do not burden with undo responsibility. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Help teens to identify projects that are age-appropriate and meaningful (e.g., clearing rubble from school grounds, collecting money or supplies for those in need).