



Helping Your Child Cope After a Disaster

After scary things happen, like a disaster or crisis, children rely on adults to help them feel safe. Families and staff can use this tip sheet to understand how to help a child after a disaster or crisis. It gives ideas for helping children cope or successfully deal with a hard situation.

How do I talk to children about what happened?

Children cope best when they understand what is happening and how it affects them. Give your child basic information about what happened. However, avoid giving extra details that might scare them.

Infants and toddlers are affected by crises and disasters. It is helpful to describe these events using very simple language like, “The big storm was loud. That felt scary. The storm is over now, and we are safe.” Repeating “You are safe” and “Grown-ups are making sure you stay safe” is often comforting for very young children.

For preschool-aged children, first tell them what happened as simply as possible. You could say something like, “A tree branch fell on electrical wires, and that is why the lights don’t work” or “There was a hurricane, a really

strong wind that hurt our house, so we have to stay with your uncle for a little while.”

Next, let your child know that people are working to help them and their community get better. Tell them who is helping: repair crews, firefighters, police, paramedics, or other emergency workers. Lastly, tell them how you and others are keeping them safe. Children often worry a disaster will happen again.

Older children will likely want more information about the disaster and recovery efforts. Regardless of your child’s age, start by asking your child what they already know. Ask them what questions they have. Use their responses to guide the conversation.



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How can I help children cope?

Try doing the following things to support your child after a disaster or crisis. Even if your child has heard about an event but was not involved, these can be helpful.

Help your child feel safe.

One of the most important things you can do is help your child feel safe.

Provide reassurance.

Assure children that people are working to keep them safe. Point out things like traffic lights, school safety officers, or smoke alarms.

Keep a normal routine.

As soon as you can, go back to a normal routine. It can start with things like singing songs if you always sing songs with your child. Read stories at the time you usually do. Keep bedtime and mealtime at regular times. We all feel safer when we know what to expect. If your child is not ready for their normal routine, don't worry. It may take them time to deal with their stress before they are ready for their normal day-to-day.

Provide comfort.

Infants and toddlers may act differently than usual. They may cry more. They may be harder to soothe. They may become fussier. Toddlers may have more temper tantrums. They may want to cling to you. Preschool and older children might draw or tell stories about their feelings. Be patient and give comfort. Holding and cuddling may soothe your child. Playing soft music or reading books can calm them, too.

Share your feelings.

Try to remain calm but share some of your own feelings. Talk to children about how you are dealing with your feelings. If you feel overwhelmed, get support from other adults first.

Listen to and accept your child's feelings.

Let your child know that it is OK to be upset about something bad that happened. Talk about any feelings your child may have. A child who feels afraid is afraid, even if adults think there is nothing to fear.

Ask questions.

Ask children if they have questions or concerns. This helps your child know that it is OK to talk. If your child asks questions, use those questions to decide what to share. If your child does not have questions, do not push. They might want to talk later.



Laughter can be healing.

Share information.

Explain events as simply and directly as possible. Remember that even young children will hear about major events and that it is best to hear about them from you and not the TV or internet or other people.

Talk about losses.

Children are also dealing with everything that comes after a disaster. Your family may need to move, at least for a little while. Your child may have to be away from friends or their school. There might be a change in income which can change daily activities. Give your child the chance to share their feelings over these losses.

Don't let them hear or see too much about the event.

Photos or descriptions of the disaster or crisis in the newspaper and on the TV, internet, radio, and social media might scare or stress children more. Try to keep you child from seeing scary photos of what happened.

Have fun.

Find ways to have fun with your child and be silly together. If your child likes to play peek-a-boo or play a favorite game, do those things. Laughter can be healing.

Be of service to others.

Children, just like adults, often feel helpless after a disaster. Find things to do that help others in your community affected by the disaster.

Reconnect with community.

Take care of yourself. This will help you take care of your child. Find ways to get support. Talking with others can be helpful. If you notice a change in yourself, get help at your Head Start program.

Be flexible and patient.

Getting back to "normal" can take awhile. Take care of yourself.



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