



After a Disaster, What You Can Do With Your Children

by Beryl Cheal

Disaster Training International
Helping Adults Help Children

Disasters all leave victims in their wake, many of those victims are children – who have no knowledge or experience in coping with what has happened.

INTRODUCTION

Do you know children who have survived a disaster? Many children are survivors of natural disasters – earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, fires and such but going through those experiences can be very frightening and very traumatic. Children are particularly susceptible.

Children who experience an initial traumatic event before they are 11 years old are three times more likely to develop psychological symptoms than those who experience their first trauma, as a teenager or later. But children are able to cope better with a traumatic event if parents, friends, family, teachers, and other adults in their lives support and help through their experiences. Help should start as soon as possible after the event.

Remember that some children may never show distress because they don't feel upset. Others may not give evidence of being upset until several weeks or even months later. Other children may not show a change in behavior at all, but they may still need your help.

This book will give ideas on how you can help your children cope with the disaster and help them return to normal life again.



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Did you know that thousands of earthquakes happen in the world every year? It's true, but most are too small to be felt by people and only a few are strong enough to cause damage.

Earthquakes are caused by the constant motion of the earth's surface. This motion causes buildup and release of energy stored in rocks at and near the earth's surface. The “quake” is the sudden rapid shaking of the earth as this energy is released. We can't do anything to prevent earthquakes, but we can prepare ourselves to cope with them. Children are able to cope most easily if they understand what happens and if they know what to do.

Floods are the most common, widespread, and can be the most devastating of all natural disasters. Some floods develop over a period of days but flash floods can result in raging waters in just a few minutes. Striking examples of flooding occurring over a period of days were the floods in Pakistan in 2010 and the Mississippi River Valley in 2011. In both of these instances more than usual precipitation caused the tributaries of major rivers to be overloaded with runoff which then flowed into the larger rivers and eventually flooded huge areas of farmland, individual homes, and communities. The water flowed down the rivers, backed up tributaries and slowly made its way to the ocean creating havoc along the way.

PREPARE FOR DISASTER

Whereas we usually cannot keep disasters from occurring we can prepare ourselves and our families to have a better chance of surviving well.

This section is designed to help parents help children be ready when a disaster should occur. Take a little time to get ready – but do get ready. Here are some ways you can do that.

- Develop a written family survival plan. Be sure to include where each person in the family will go if a disaster occurs. Also include an-out-of-area person to call in an emergency. Develop exact steps for children to follow in implementing the plan for children do better if expectations of them are very clear. Practice the plan every three (3) months with all the family. Remember to change your plan when family circumstances change.



- Look around your house and find several safe places in every room to go to on a moment's notice. Inside walls are best in storms. In earthquakes teach your children to **drop, cover, and hold on**. Beware of the possibility of doors slamming on fingers during earthquakes. Pick places to shelter where things will not fall on anyone – away from windows, bookcases, or tall, heavy furniture. Have a contest to see who can be first to get to the designated place. Kitchens and garages tend to be the most dangerous places in a home.
- Decide with your children at least two ways to exit every room in your house. Practice going through the exits. It may be that one of the exit possibilities is through a window. Be sure to practice that possibility also.
- To be ready for a possible house fire, plan at least two escape routes from your house.
- Be sure to make arrangements for pets in your plan. If you must evacuate your home, it is always best to take pets with you but for health and space reasons they may not be allowed in emergency shelters. Prepare for their safety if you must leave them at home.
- Help your children develop their own survival plan book. They can draw pictures, use special colors, and otherwise decorate their books. This could be a very fun activity for children. And it's even more fun and less stressful if parents work with their children in developing their book. Place the book in a convenient location to be reviewed frequently and shared with visitors.
- Prepare a **Family Supply Kit** that you may need after a disaster. It is a good idea for children and parents to work together in preparing a **Family Supply Kit** for children's involvement in disaster planning helps calm their fears. In helping your children prepare, remember that planning for basic supplies (food, water, medicines) should be done first. Until basic needs are satisfied children will not be able to concentrate on other aspects of preparations. A list of food and supplies for your **Family Supply Kit** is at the end of this book.
- With your children, prepare a **Kids Activity Survival Kit** for each child. Store each one beside your **Family Supply Kit**. (All kits are listed at the end of this book.) Be prepared to take your kits with you if you need to evacuate your home.
- Develop a calendar with your children to help the family remember to keep the survival kits in good working order: change the water, food, and batteries every six (6) months. Keep the calendar in a handy place
- Post emergency telephone numbers near every telephone in your house. Teach your children what each service (911, police, etc.) provides and how to dial numbers. Practice many times. After a couple of months practice again. Instruct your children how to use cell phones and what numbers to call in case of emergency. Start early to train your



children. They may not remember what to do when they are three years old but keep practicing for soon they will know what they should do when needed.

- If your children are too young to read, draw pictures to help them identify the correct telephone numbers to call in the event of an emergency. Have them color the pictures as you talk about what they need to do.
- If your electricity goes off cordless phones will not work. Unplug everything from your telephone line, let it sit for 5 min. and then plug in a standard phone. If the phone lines are OK you will have phone service.
- Learn to know a HAM radio operator. During some situations the phone company does not allow local telephone calls. HAM radio would be a way to communicate locally. There are HAM radio operators in many communities.
- If you use babysitters, tell them about your family survival plan and where the **Family Supply Kit** is located. Suggest they practice the plan with the children while in their care.
- Have fun developing your survival plan. They say that children laugh some 400 times a day during “normal” times. Help them find things to laugh about even when talking about a possible disaster. Laughing is good for our well-being.
- Have your children carry written information with their name, parents, and care givers names as well as their personal address, telephone number, and out-of-area-person to call.
- Every night have your children place their eyeglasses in a hard case on the table beside the bed. This will keep them safe from falling objects and easier to find in the dark if the electricity goes out. Your children should always keep a pair of sturdy shoes beside their bed. Sturdy shoes will ensure your children's feet are not cut by fallen debris when walking around if an earthquake or violent storm should occur.
- During winter months be sure to keep plenty of food on hand in case you can't get out to go grocery shopping.
- Take first aid and CPR classes. Your local emergency response persons may not be able to reach everyone who needs help immediately. Your skills may be necessary to help your family.
- Install check valves in sewer traps to prevent floodwaters from backing up into sewer lines.
- Store 1 gallon of water per day per family member. A three day supply should be stored for every person. Store extra water for nursing mothers and ill people and for any powdered foods stored in your survival kits.
- Assemble a first aid kit for your home and another for each of your vehicles. Store them in very convenient places, accessible to family members.



TAKING SHELTER IN A STORM

- ◆ Determine where and how you will take shelter in a storm. If someone in your family is disabled be sure to include that person in all your plans. If someone uses a wheelchair, make sure more than one exit from your home is wheelchair accessible in case the primary exit is blocked. Be sure to store back-up equipment, such as a manual wheelchair, at a neighbor's home, school or your workplace.
- ◆ If someone in your household is hearing impaired make sure they have a flashlight, pad and pencil near their bed at night. Make sure someone is their special source of information if instructions on what to do come over the radio.
- ◆ Put all your necessary family documents in waterproof packets, ready to be picked up and taken with you quickly.
- ◆ Keep your vehicle gas tanks “topped off” for a quick getaway.
- ◆ If you live in tornado country know the quickest way to get to your basement or other safe place if a tornado warning sounds.
- ◆ If you live in hurricane country learn safe routes inland – away from the coast. Be ready to drive 20 to 50 miles to locate a safe place, if necessary. Take a short trip with your family before a hurricane strikes to find the safest routes and where you might stay, if needed. Children sometimes get frightened thinking of a hurricane so talk with them in a calm, matter-of-fact voice about their helping to find a safe place if a storm should occur. Being safe is very important for children.
- ◆ If you live in an area that is prone to wildfires know the quickest way to get to a safe place, away from fire danger. Don't forget to practice your getaway frequently.



LEARN ABOUT DISASTERS THAT MIGHT OCCUR IN YOUR AREA

Children tend to have more fear when they feel powerless. As they develop a greater sense of control over their lives their fears tend to decrease. Learning about disasters can help them gain a sense of control.

1. Have science lessons with your children. To know more about earthquakes talk with them about the earth's plates, and faults, and why the earth shifts. For weather related disasters such as tornadoes, hurricanes, or other violent storms talk with them about weather patterns, El Niño and other such weather phenomena. Volcanoes are also very interesting for children and can be the subject of many discussions and learning opportunities.
2. Talk with your children about the importance of fire and water in their lives. Along with factual information, find native American legends or legends/stories from other countries about the origins of fire and water.
3. Get books that tell facts about various disasters, look at the pictures, read the explanations, and talk about what you see. Books like *Wildfires* by Seymour Simon, *Floods* by Arlene Erlbach and *Sparkling, Silent Snow* by Madelyn Wood Carlisle are filled with good information.
4. Talk about disasters that have happened in your area in the past.
5. Talk with people who have been through a disaster. What was it like? What did they do? Would they do the same things again? Would they do something different?
6. With your children read books about various disasters. *If You Lived at the Time of the Great San Francisco Earthquake* by Ellen Lavine is a very good one on the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Books like, *Storms* by Seymour Simon give very good information about various storms – and there are lots more.



THINGS CHILDREN CAN DO

→Along with their parents, children can attend emergency preparedness training meetings in your community.

→With puppets, handmade or purchased, devise stories or puppet shows that illustrate the family's survival plan. Perform the shows for the neighbors, friends and family. Develop skits or plays showing the activities of each person as described in the family's survival plan.

→Write stories and draw pictures about disasters they have experienced or disasters they know about.

→For children too young to write, a parent might act as a “scribe”. Writing down everything the child tells you, just the way it is said. No editorializing!

→If a child hears about a disaster but has not been through it themselves encourage him/her to draw pictures of what they think it would feel like to be in an earthquake, a violent storm, a volcanic eruption, a tsunami, a mudslide, or a flood. What do they think might happen? Don't worry if the pictures the child produces do not look realistic. Children draw what they **know** rather than what they see or the objects adults might recognize. They may want to tell you about it or they may not. Either is OK.

→Write to children in areas of the world where a disaster has recently occurred and ask them about it. Make contact with a possible new pen pal through non-profit agencies working in the area, the Red Cross, religious organizations, or the United Nations. Children like to help others. Help your children send things to their new pen pals that would be useful to them, or things they would enjoy and have fun with. Your children could send pictures of themselves, their families or their pets.

→As a family, make something for each person to wear all the time, like a string bracelet. Looking at it and feeling it could help children think of happy times together if family members get separated.

→Some species of pine trees produce pine cones that only open to let their seeds out to grow new trees if they get very hot, like in a fire. Children could do some research to find the specific specie of pine tree that reseeds in that manner. Where do these trees grow? If they find tightly closed pine cones they can help those cones open by heating them in the microwave. When the cone has opened, take it out of the microwave with a hot pad, take it outside and allow the released seeds to fly up into the air. They come down looking like helicopters – ready to start growing another tree.



→With friends, start a science club to study things like: what part of our bodies loses heat most quickly? Why does air keep us warm sometimes and at other times keep us cool? What plants and animals live in the water around us? How do goose bumps keep us warm? Report the answers to your class at school.

FLOODS

* Children who have survived a flood sometimes are afraid when it starts raining. To help children be less afraid, talk with them about the importance of water. We need water and it is only when there is too much water or it is in the wrong place is it dangerous. You might do things like listen to the many sounds that water makes, from the roar of a fast moving river to the single drop of water from the roof of your house. What are different ways of crossing water? Take pictures or draw pictures of some of these ways. Find out several different ways that water has been used for religious ceremonies around the world. Report these findings in a special report to your class. Find out how plants and animals in the desert store water so they can survive. Check out the history of taking a bath and tell their class. Draw a mural tracing the flow of a drop of water **from** the sea **back** to the sea. Make up poems about the rain and how you feel when it is falling.

* Find out what is different about two lakes, the Great Salt Lake and the Dead Sea, and other lakes in the world.

* Read some of the myths and legends of cultures in other parts of the world. Discover their beliefs of why floods sometimes occur.

FIRE

* Find out what the 3 things are that fire needs to burn. If you take away 1 of them what happens? Report this to your class at school.

* Find out how woodlands and forests recover from a wildfire. Report what you find to your teacher.

* What are 3 good ways that we use fire in our lives?

* Conduct a fire hazard hunt around the inside and outside of your house.

* Find out how soot is made and report it to your family.



WINTER STORMS

- * In the snow, search for animal tracks and talk about the animals that have left the tracks: where they live, how they keep warm, and what they eat?
- * Talk about different ways people have of keeping warm and dry in cold weather. Why do these systems work?
- * Take a piece of black paper outside when it is snowing. As a snowflake lands on the paper look at it through a magnifying glass to see its shape. Are any two shapes just exactly the same?
- * Make a snow angel outside in the snow. Read *Snow Angel* by Jean Marzolo. It is a story of a child accidentally left behind in a snowstorm. It shows how imagination can rescue us when we are alone.
- * In very cold weather take a round bubble blower outside. Gently blow a bubble with soapy water, don't let it blow away, hold it still. If it's very cold tiny crystals should form on the surface of the bubble until it freezes completely. You will have a thin ice crystal ball.

HURRICANES AND TORNADOS

- * Know your local hurricane or tornado “watch” and “warning” signals. Always follow instructions given.
- * Since both hurricanes and tornadoes come from violent weather, become a “Weather Wizard”. Find out some things about the weather so you will understand it and be able to predict whether changes.
- * Start a “Weather Watch Club” with your friends. Each of you could start your own weather station or have one for the club at a central location. Get a book like *The Usborne Big Book of Science Experiments* by Alastair Smith (available online or through bookstores) to find out what equipment you will need and how to make each item.
- * Finding out about weather clues can be fun. Many people look at animals to help them know what the winter will be like. Find out what animals in your area are said to predict the weather and what the predictions are for next winter. Write the predictions down so that next spring you will know whether they turned out to be true. Children can make their own predictions by interviewing old-timers in the community, the radio or TV weather persons to get information



about weather history and current weather patterns. Doing weather research online could also help children predict the weather for next year.

* Make regular weather observations and record them so you'll really know about your local weather.

* Become a “Weather Reporter” for your family. Report your weather findings and predictions to your family at a special time every day. Later, record how accurate you have been.

* Visit your local television station and talk with the meteorologist who talks about whether on the air. Before you go, write down a list of questions you will want to ask that person.

* Put together a list of “stormy questions” to ask your friends. You might think of questions like:

- What is the deadliest storm on Earth?
- Which type of storm sometimes whirls objects up in the air and then sets them down, completely undisturbed, nearby?
- What kinds of clouds are sometimes called “Mare’s tails”?
- What kind of clouds might be called “fair weather” clouds?

Have fun thinking of lots more questions.

* Have a contest of who can answer the most “stormy questions”. The winner could get a prize by being the first person to tell of an approaching storm! They will predict it from the weather information they gather, of course.

* Find out how many miles away a thunderstorm is. Hint: count the seconds between the time you see a flash of lightning and when you hear the thunder. Count slowly: “and a 1, and a 2, and a 3, and a 4, and a 5,” and so on. Then divide by 5. Every 5 seconds equals 1 mile. If, for example, 10 seconds go by, you are 2 miles from the center of the storm.

* Do you know why you see the lightning before you hear the thunder, unless the storm is directly overhead? Tell your mom.

* Learn whether clues and see if they work. Sailors, poets, farmers, inventors, and scientists over the years have made many weather observations. One of these is that you can smell more, both good and bad smells, before a storm. Find out why this might be true.

* Here is another weather clue. If the cat is sneezing or dancing or washing her fur against the grain, look out for rain. You can find others.



* Find books in your local library that tell about weather legends. For instance, the ancient Greeks used to think that wind was the earth breathing in and out. Sometimes areas of the country are named for weather. Enumclaw, a town in Washington state, means “thunder”. Many years ago a group of native Americans were encamped nearby. Being so terrified by a thunderstorm they fled, leaving the name to mark the spot. Look for other legends and other towns that might have names because of weather.

* If you live near an airport, how do you know which way the wind is blowing by observing the direction that planes take off? What other forms of transportation are affected by wind?

* Make up poems or free verse sayings about wind and rain. Sing-song patterns of words make it easier to remember and more fun to say. Young children love rhyming words and words used over and over in stories or poems. One type of poem it is easy for children is haiku. It is a Japanese form of poetry that consists of three lines. The first line has 5 syllables, the second line has 7 and the third line has 5. This is an example of haiku:

The snow-covered tree
Sparkles in the soft moonlight
The wind rushes by.

There are many different kinds of poems. Find another kind that you could use also.

EARTHQUAKES

* Try an experiment. Make a box of gelatin and refrigerate it in a flat metal pan, filled nearly to the top. When completely gelled, set the pan on top of a flat surface; tap the side of the pan. Children will be able to see the waves traveling through the gelatin, much like the waves of an earthquake traveling through the earth.

* Cover the top of the gelatin with clear plastic wrap so the gelatin will be clean enough to eat later. Be sure the wrap touches the gelatin. Stack sugar cubes on top of the plastic to represent buildings. Gently move the pan and notice how the “buildings” react. Construct different kinds of “buildings” and predict what will happen.

* Remove the plastic wrap and serve the gelatin. Talk about what children saw and how it might be similar to what scientists believe earthquake waves or seismic waves are like. Seismic waves are caused by the release of energy in the Earth's rocks during an earthquake.

* Young children can get an idea about how furniture will move during an earthquake by shaking their dollhouse and watching how the doll furniture falls over and moves across the floor.



* Here is another experiment. Make a simple cake; bake it, cool it, and place it on an aluminum foil cake pan. While children are watching, have a parent pick up the cake pan and bend the bottom of the pan back and forth several times to simulate earthquake waves. As the cake cracks, talk about how the earth sometimes cracks near the place where the earthquake starts, the “focus”. It is important to let children know that the cracks do not close and “gobble up” people. They stay open until weather rain and the erosion gradually fill them in.

* Discuss the movement of the earth further as everyone enjoys eating the cake and talking about what it might be like to see great cracks in the earth.

* Play “Finish the Sentence” with a parent or another child. The adult or other child starts the sentence and the first child finishes it. It could go something like this:

“If an earthquake comes and I am at home, I will”

“If an earthquake comes and I am at school, I will”

“If an earthquake comes and I am outside playing, I will”

Then reverse the process. The first child says the first part of the sentence and the adult or the other child ends the sentence. It could go something like this:

“If an earthquake comes and I am at work I will”

“If an earthquake comes and I am petting the dog, I will”

“If an earthquake comes and I am eating breakfast, I will”

Make up your own variations. Have fun with it!

* Find in your public library a book about earthquake legends. It may have stories about the legends of earthquakes from different countries. A legend from West Africa is that the Earth is a flat disc, held up on one side by an enormous mountain and on the other by a giant. The Giants’ wife holds up the sky. The earth trembles whenever he stops to hug her. Many countries have legends about earthquakes, and it is fun to find out what others think and the stories their children learn. Draw pictures about what you have read.

* Earthquakes shape our earth. Take a ride in the country. Do you see hills and valleys that the movement of the earth has caused? Talk about this with your parents. Find other places where the earth has moved.

* Take a ride in the mountains and look at the cuts in the hillsides beside the highway. Is there evidence of the earth having moved sometime in the past? Talk to your parents about how the earth has shifted over time.

* Talk about what animals might do in an earthquake. How will this be different than humans?



* Play the game “Find a Hazard”. Look around your house and search for any places where heavy things might fall off shelves; cupboard doors that might open and spill what is inside; or furniture that might slide across the room during the shaking of an earthquake. Have a contest. The child who finds the most hazards gets a special treat. Talk to your parents about how some of those hazards that were found might be fixed so that your house would be safer.

* Go on a “Neighborhood Hazard Hunt”. Find things in your neighborhood that might be unsafe in an earthquake. Then go with your parents to see officials in your community to request that they fix the earthquake hazards that you have found.

HERE ARE SOME THINGS PARENTS CAN DO

- ✓ Watch and listen to your children at play. Their play is a superb litmus test revealing how they feel. If you hear fear or worry in their voices or in what they say or do, talk with them about those feelings. Remember feelings are neither good nor bad. They are just OK. Everyone has them.
- ✓ Sometimes just listening to your children will be enough. At other times adults may want to help them figure out something they can do that will help them feel better. Get ideas from your children. Actually, it may even be as simple as putting the **Bedside Kits** in different locations where children are able to reach them a little easier. Or it may take some other action. It may be enough however, to recognize the fear without needing to do anything further.
- ✓ Encourage your children to share your family survival plan with their friends and neighbors. Explaining their plan to others will help your children learn it better. It may also encourage other children to talk with their parents about developing their own plan.
- ✓ Develop plans with your children about what they will do if a disaster occurs while they are shopping, driving, or at school.
- ✓ If there has just been an earthquake tell your children that aftershocks will probably occur. They may be less severe than the original quake but the same precautions should be followed: if inside, **DROP**, get under a table, **COVER** their head, **HOLD** onto a table leg and travel with it, if it moves. If your child is outside go to an open area away from trees, wires, or buildings.



- ✓ Always talk about the possibility of disaster in a calm tone of voice. Children take their cues from adults about how to feel. If adults act in frantic ways, children will also be frantic. If adults are calm, children usually remain calm also.
- ✓ Children's major fears after disaster are: (1) **that it will happen again and someone will be hurt**; (2) **they will be separated from their family**; and (3) **they will be left alone**. In preparation adults should emphasize their love for their children; that having a survival plan will help the family be safe and bring members back together; and that the plan will be a good way to make sure they are not left alone.
- ✓ Be sure you know several routes to your children's schools and childcare facilities. Practice all of them several times for you may need to try several routes in picking them up if your normal route is blocked in the event of disaster.
- ✓ Know the survival plans and policies of your children's schools and childcare facilities.
- ✓ Make plans to have someone pick up your children if you are unable to do so. Before there is a crisis give the school or childcare facility the names of these people as alternates for picking up your children.
- ✓ Talk often with your children about what you, their parents, will be doing to keep the family together and safe. Children need reassurance by adult's words as well as their actions.
- ✓ For your own well-being, take care of yourself so that you can take care of your children. You are little good to them if you are not able to provide the leadership that your children need and deserve.
- ✓ Find ways and places where you can relax and express your feelings. Sharing some of your feelings with your children is important but you will want to find a place, away from them, to express the full extent of what you may be feeling. Parents need time alone, too.
- ✓ Develop a support group among friends or adult members of your family where you can talk freely about how you are feeling and about how things are going for you. You may also want to tell them about how your family preparations are progressing. Preparing for a disaster can be stressful, even though you know that good preparation could make the difference between tragedy and survival.



AFTER A DISASTER

Behaviors children may show

They may:

- Be upset because of the loss of a favorite toy, blanket, teddy bear, things that adults might consider insignificant, but are important to the child.
- Change from being quiet, obedient, and caring about others to being loud, noisy, and aggressive. Or change from being aggressive and outgoing to being shy, afraid, and withdrawn.
- Develop nighttime fears, be afraid to sleep alone at night or with the light off, be afraid to sleep in their own room, or have nightmares or bad dreams.
- Be afraid the event will reoccur with the same terror they had experienced.
- Become easily upset, crying, and whining.
- Lose trust in adults. After all, their adults were supposed to take care of them – and now see what has happened!
- Revert to younger behaviors such as bedwetting and thumb sucking.
- Feel guilty that they caused the disaster because of something they had said or done.
- Not want parents out of their sight and refuse to go to school or childcare.
- Become afraid of wind and rain or sudden **loud** noises.
- Have symptoms of illness such as upset stomach, headaches, vomiting, fever, not wanting to eat.
- Worry about where they and their family will live.

Here are more things parents can do to help their children

Talk with your children about how they are feeling and listen to them without judging. Let your children know that they can have their own feelings. They may feel differently from other people, and that's OK.

Let your children take as much time as they need to figure things out and to have their feelings. Don't rush them nor pretend that they don't think or feel as they do. If intense feelings continue for several weeks get in touch with a mental health professional to give assistance.

Help your children learn to use words to express their feelings. You may want to give them some words to use like: happy, sad, angry, mad, scared, love or relief. Be sure they use words that fit their feelings – not yours.



Young children in particular are often afraid of being left alone after a disaster so spend extra time with them. Assure them that you are there and will take care of them. You may need to reassure them many times before they really believe what you say. Be patient.

Stay together as a family is much as possible, even as you go about family tasks of recovering from a disastrous event. If you must be away for a time tell them when you will return. Make sure you return at that time or call and tell them when to expect you. If someone else will be caring for them during that time tell your children who that will be.

Go back to former family routines as soon as possible. If new routines are needed ask your children to help develop those. Maintain a regular schedule, so children will be able to predict at least that part of their lives.

In your family model the process of working out problems together, listening and considering various options.

Let your children know that whatever happened was not their fault. It did not happen because of anything they said or did.

Children feel their lives are out of control after a traumatic event. Think of things where they can be in control, such as choosing between two possible outfits to wear for the day or choosing what the family will have for dinner once a week. Only give choices that are appropriate to the age of the child and that you can live with.

Help your children know that others love them and care about them by visiting, talking on the phone, or writing to family members, friends and neighbors.

Encourage your children to give or send pictures they have drawn or things they have written to people like their grandparents or neighbors that are “shut in”.

Encourage extended family to visit, call on the phone, or write to your children – reestablish connections. Encourage them to send pictures of enjoyable times together.

Help your children learn to trust adults again. Ways to do that are: keep promises you make; include your children in planning the family routines and outings; listen to your children and talk with them about their ideas. You can think of other ways, too.

Because children frequently lose faith in the future as a result of a traumatic event, help them develop plans for activities that will take place this afternoon or next week. Talk with them about what may happen this summer and what they want to be when they grow up.



Children cope better after a traumatic event if they are healthy. Be sure your children get health care as soon as possible when needed. And be sure your children are receiving plenty of good food. This may take some special planning if those foods are not readily available. Your children may not want to eat so encourage them with things they particularly like – just make sure it's healthy food. Later you can go back to a really balanced diet. Your children will also need plenty of rest after a traumatic event. Plan for restful times during the day and more than usual sleep at night.

Spend extra time with your children at bedtime. Read stories, rub their backs, listen to soothing music, talk quietly about the day's events, reassuring them that you will be there when they wake up. Younger children may want to sleep with their favorite doll, teddy bear or "blankie".

Your children may want you to leave the light on as they go to sleep or want to sleep in your room at night. Allow these special privileges until they feel comfortable. Helping them plan when they will return to their regular routines can be useful. Talk with your children about how they need special things right now but later they will feel better and can go back to their normal habits. Give them time.

Limit your children's exposure to additional trauma. Turn off the TV if disastrous events are being shown. If that is not possible watch or listen with them and talk about what you have just seen or heard. Reassure them that you they are safe now and that you will take care of them.

Children should not be expected to be "brave" and not cry or be "tough" and pretend they aren't or weren't afraid. The reactions your children have are normal reactions. Think of your children's reactions as normal for abnormal circumstances. They particularly need comfort and reassurance after a disaster.

Don't be afraid to spoil your children right now. They will go back to more normal "grown-up" behavior when they have worked through their own feelings. That may take some time. Again, be patient.

In helping your children understand the event, be truthful but you may not need to go into great detail. Adults tend to give more information than young children can use. When your children start to get distracted, you will know they have heard enough for the moment.

Don't minimize the event for your children. Accept their feelings without judgment, impatience, ridicule or teasing. To act as if the event was trivial is to give the impression that children's feelings are not important and children may believe that what they experienced was not real or was not really important.



When appropriate commonly share some of your feelings with your children. Children need to see that parents have feelings, too.

Encourage your children's imagination. Having a vivid imagination can help children work through and cope with stressful events.

Telling your children that you love them and will take care of them is important but sometimes “actions speak louder than words”. Children need both – words and actions. Find ways to show them that you are caring for them by talking about things you are doing to keep them safe, such as driving a different route to school because it is safer than your “regular” route; or finding another place to live because the old house isn't safe anymore.

Allow your children to grieve losses that often come with disasters. It may be the loss of a favorite teddy bear, a special blanket, or a family pet. Each child develops his/her own unique attachments to objects, pets, and people and need opportunities to grieve their loss. Listen to your children when they talk about that special thing and in time your children can help pick out a substitute, if appropriate.

Opportunity for your children to grieve the loss of a friend or family member is very important. Talk about that person and the wonderful things you did together. Develop a special place in your house where you can display pictures and items that belonged to him/her. Make a memory box filled with small pieces of paper with words describing characteristics of that person (like caring, loving, lots of fun, beautiful, generous, etc.) written on them. Your children can think of many words to put on the papers. Every once in a while take out a paper, read it, laugh or cry a little and return it to the box for another time.

Develop anniversary activities to commemorate the disastrous event. Those commemorative times may bring back tears but it's also a time to celebrate survival and your children's ability to get back to a normal life. Help them recognize their strength and perseverance.

Strengthen your children's self-concept

- Give your children a belief in their own abilities and inner resources. The way a child feels about him/herself makes a big difference in how they are able to cope with tragedy and loss.
- Here are some ways you can do that:
- Help your children know they are valuable members of the family by asking their opinions on topics of conversation in the family. Listen to their responses. They may surprise you!



- Really listen to your children and acknowledge their feelings. Remember feelings are not good or bad. They just **ARE** and everyone has them. It is not the feelings that many parents object to – it is really the acting out of those feelings that cause problems. Often if feelings can be expressed, and accepted merely as feelings, that is all that is needed. If children know their parents understand their feelings they frequently do not have to act them out.
- Help your children feel good about their bodies and abilities. For instance, talk with them about how they are growing up, how much more they can do now than before, and how nice they look in that color or in that style of clothing.
- Allow your children to make choices. Allowing choices tells your children that you have confidence in their decision-making. Be sure that you only give choices that you can live with.

Activities that can help children lessen their fear and stress

Children understand the world differently than adults. Young children in particular need to express and explore their experiences symbolically, to play. Provide toys, books, materials and equipment for their use, for they will need many opportunities to “work through” the events they have experienced.

Encourage your children to draw or paint pictures of how they feel about their experience. Hang these at child's level to be seen easily. Art is a particularly good way to express feelings. The artwork doesn't have to look like something adults recognize. A large part of the value of doing this activity is in the process of doing it, not what it looks like at the end or to someone else.

Write the story of the frightening event. You might start with, “Once upon a time there was a terrible..... and it scared us all. It happened like this.....” have your children write about what happened and how they felt. And with “..... and we are safe now.” A written story of the event will become part of your family's record and will provide many memories, both sad and happy, in years to come.

Playing with Play-dough (recipe at end of this book) or Clay is good for children to release tension and to make symbolic creations. Children may want to keep their work or not. Either is OK.

Music is fun and valuable for children. Creating music with instruments or rhythm bands (use sticks, lids of pots in the kitchen, small rocks in a can with a tight fitting lid, or other noise makers) helps relieve stress and tension. Listening to music can calm a child or lively music can be a great way to encourage children to dance, another stress reducer.



For young children sand and water play are calming and give good informal opportunities to talk about how they are feeling, to make up stories about their experiences, and to symbolically act out those experiences again – this time in a safe place. Children may need to go through their experiences many times before they can move on. That's OK. Give them time.

Telling or reading stories to children can be helpful and fun. If they are young, adults can read to them or have available picture books for them to use on their own.

Older children may find adventure stories about children who have survived disasters exciting and fun. It also helps them think about how others have survived, and that they will survive too.

Provide young children with clothing, shoes, hats, etc. that you no longer use for them to play “dress-up”. Opportunities to practice being an adult, discussing problems, making decisions and telling others what to do gives children a sense of control of their lives. It also gives opportunities for informal talking about the events that have taken place.

Provide puzzles for children to put together. For young children wooden puzzles are sturdy and fun, for older children jigsaw puzzles are good. Puzzles provide opportunities to solve problems, a place where they can be in control, and opportunities to calm themselves by repeating the activity many times if they feel like doing that.

Children should have opportunities for large muscle activities like climbing, jumping, running, or yelling. “Letting off steam” is very important, but be sure the activities are safe for everyone.

Make puppets with your children and put on a puppet show for the family and friends. Playing with puppets is a wonderful way for children to play out their emotions. Sometimes children will talk through puppets when they are unable to say the same things in person. Be sure the puppet play is safe for everyone.

Help your children make up this get about the event or their feelings about it. Use costumes and simple sets. Take the show “on the road” to your children's school, the home of a special friend, or an older person in your neighborhood.

When appropriate, help your children do something special for someone else who has been in the disaster. Be creative! Helping another person not only helps children focus on something besides their own selves but gives another person the pleasure of receiving special attention. When children think about others, they often are able to put into perspective their own feelings and needs.



RESOURCES

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For children

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