

Helping Children After a Disaster

By Beryl Cheal, originally published by Disaster Training International

Why This Matters

Children who experience trauma before age 11 are **three times more likely** to develop psychological symptoms than those who do later in life. With **early, compassionate support** from adults, children can begin to heal in healthy, resilient ways.

Common Reactions in Children After a Disaster

Children may show normal reactions to abnormal events:

- Loss of a special item (toy, blanket) causes distress
 - Personality changes: quiet to aggressive or outgoing to withdrawn
 - Nighttime fears: nightmares, fear of sleeping alone
 - Fear of recurrence
 - Increased crying, whining
 - Loss of trust in adults
 - Regression (thumb-sucking, bedwetting)
 - Separation anxiety
 - Feelings of guilt
 - Fear of weather or loud noises
 - Physical symptoms: headache, nausea, fever
 - Worry about housing or family stability
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What Adults Can Do to Help

- Listen and validate feelings—no judgment
- Let them feel at their own pace
- Teach them words for their emotions

- Offer repeated reassurance
 - Stick to routines or create new ones
 - Reinforce that the disaster was **not their fault**
 - Give small choices to restore control
 - Reconnect with extended family and loved ones
 - Keep promises, include them in planning
 - Support their health: food, sleep, and medical care
 - Take care of yourself, too
 - Be present at bedtime: read, talk, play calming music
 - Be honest and age-appropriate with information
 - Avoid media overexposure
 - Don't expect them to be “brave”
 - Allow grief—and celebrate survival
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Activities to Support Healing

- **Draw or paint** feelings; hang at child's eye level
 - **Write a story** about the event, ending with “And we are safe now”
 - Use **playdough or clay** for symbolic expression
 - Make **music** using rhythm instruments
 - Provide **dress-up clothes** for recovery role play
 - Create **puppets** and put on a skit
 - Read age-appropriate **books about disasters**
 - Reassure with phrases like: “I'm glad we are safe now.”
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Tip: Print and keep this handout in your emergency preparedness folder or post it in common areas where adults and caregivers gather.