

# Helping Your Child Cope After a Natural Disaster

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Children have limited life experiences, so for them to be afraid, especially after a natural disaster, is normal. The fear or anxiety may last for days to years and is handled best with kindness and understanding from parents and other adults.

Children should be encouraged to talk about their feelings and express their fears through play, drawing, painting or clay/play dough. Caring conversations can help them process any fears.

Research indicates that children's fears vary according to age, maturation and previous learning experiences. Four major fears common in children are death, darkness, animals and abandonment. When a disaster occurs, children may experience anxieties that range from the safety of loved ones to loss of a toy.

Children's fears may be intensified when adults do not discuss those fears with children. Many families ban all painful topics from family conversation, which may intensify uncertainty and fear in the children. To help children cope with fears, adults must take the time to listen to and talk with children.

## Following a disaster, some children may:

- Be upset or sad at the loss of a favorite toy, blanket, special clothing item or gift, book, pet, etc.
- Be angry or irritable. They may hit, kick or throw things to show their anger.
- Become upset more easily and whine, complain, cling or throw tantrums.
- Become more active and restless, feeling uncertain or on edge.
- Be afraid of the disaster recurring. They may ask many times, "Will it come again?"
- Be afraid to be left alone or sleep alone. Children may want to sleep with a parent or sibling. They may have nightmares.
- Behave as they did when younger. They may start sucking their thumb, wetting the bed, asking for a bottle or wanting to be held.
- Have symptoms of illness such as nausea, vomiting, headaches, fever, or not wanting to eat.
- Be quiet and withdrawn, not wanting to talk about the experience, or spending time alone or on digital devices.
- Feel guilty that they caused the disaster because of some previous behavior. Also, some children may feel guilty that they are okay, but friends or others are displaced or suffering.
- Feel neglected by parents who are busy trying to clean up and rebuild their lives and homes.
- Refuse to go to school or to child care. The child may not want to be out of the parent's sight or presence.
- Become afraid or anxious due to loud noises, rain, storms or negative media reports.
- Not show any outward sign of being upset. Some children may never show distress because they do not feel upset. Other children may not give evidence of being upset until several weeks or months after the disaster.

# What Parents Can Do to Help Children Cope with Feelings

- Take time to acknowledge and manage your own feelings of grief, fear, anxiety and anger. Seek support as needed so you can be better equipped to support your children.
- Talk with your child, providing simple, accurate information to questions.
- Talk with your child about your own feelings in age-appropriate words, but don't share your adult worries with them.
- Listen to what your child says and how your child says it. Does the child show fear, anxiety, insecurity? Repeating the child's words may be very helpful, such as "You are afraid that..." or "You wonder if the storm will come again tonight." This helps you and the child clarify feelings and build understanding.
- Reassure your child, "We are together. We care about you. We will take care of you."
- You may need to repeat information and reassurances many times, especially with younger children. Do not stop responding just because you told the child once or even 10 times. Consistency and reassurance are very important in assisting children to cope with feelings of fear or uncertainty, especially if they experienced previous trauma or natural disasters.
- Hold your child. Provide comfort. Physical security is important for children during this period. Hugs and holding hands are tangible and reassuring. Close contact helps assure children that you are there and will not abandon them.
- Spend extra time putting your child to bed. Talk and offer assurance. Leave a night light on if that makes the child feel more secure.
- Observe your child at play. Listen to what is said and how the child plays. Children frequently express feelings of fear or anger while playing with dolls or other toys, drawing, or being with friends after a disaster.
- Provide play experiences to relieve tension and work through feelings. Work with play dough or paint, play in water, etc. If children show a need to hit or kick or be physically active, give them something safe, such as a pillow, ball or balloon. Allow a safe, open space for them to play if possible.
- If your child lost a meaningful toy or blanket, allow the child to mourn and grieve (by crying, perhaps). It is all part of helping the young child cope with feelings about the disaster. In time, replacing the lost object may be helpful.
- If you need help for your child, contact the Extension office in your county, a mental health agency or school counselor.



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Based on information developed by Clemson Cooperative Extension following Hurricane Hugo. Revised for Virginia audiences by Virginia Cooperative Extension. April 1997. Updated and revised February 2025 by NDSU Extension.

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