

Helping Children After a Disaster

It's important to remember some children may never show distress, while others may not give evidence of being upset for several weeks or even months after an emergency. Other children may not show a change in behavior, but may still need your help.

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 later. Children are able to cope better with a traumatic event if parents and other adults support and help them with their experiences. Help should start as soon as possible after the event.

Children exhibit the following behaviors after a disaster:

- Be upset over the loss of a favorite toy or possession that is important to them.
- Change from being quiet, obedient and caring to loud, noisy and aggressive, or change from being outgoing to shy and afraid.
- Develop night-time fears (nightmares, fear of the dark or sleeping alone).
- Be afraid the event will reoccur.
- Become easily upset.
- Lose trust in adults. (After all, their adults were not able to control the disaster.)
- Revert to younger behavior (bed-wetting, thumb-sucking).
- Want to stay close to parents. Refuse to go to school or day care.
- Feel they caused the disaster because of something they said or did.
- Become afraid of wind, rain or sudden loud noises.
- Have symptoms of illness, such as headaches, vomiting or fever.

- Worry about where they and their family will live.

Things parents can do to help their children

- Talk with children about how they are feeling. Assure them that it's okay to have those feelings.
- Help children learn to use words that express their feelings, such as "happy," "sad," or "angry."
- Children should not be expected to be brave or tough. Tell them it's okay to cry.
- Don't give children more information than they can handle about the disaster.
- Assure fearful children you will be there to care for them; consistently reassure them.
- Go back to former routines as soon as possible. Maintain a regular schedule for the children.
- Reassure children that the disaster was not their fault.
- Let children have some control, such as choosing clothing or what meal to have for dinner.
- Re-establish contact with extended family.
- Help your children learn to trust adults again by keeping promises you make.
- Help your children regain faith in the future by making plans.
- Get needed health care as soon as possible.
- Spend extra time with your children at bedtime.
- Make sure children eat healthy meals and get enough rest.
- Allow special privileges for a short period of time, such as leaving the light on when they go to bed.
- Find ways to emphasize to your children that you love them.

- Allow children time to grieve losses.
- Develop positive anniversary activities to commemorate the event. These may bring tears, but they are also a time to celebrate survival and the ability to get back to a normal life.



Washington State Department of Health

PO Box 47890

Olympia, WA 98504-7890

Web Site: www.doh.wa.gov

360-236-4027

(800) 525-0127