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Research and Extension



Disasters: Children's Responses and Helping Them Recover

Natural disasters, family changes such as divorce, death, serious injury, or community violence can be traumatic for both children and adults. Everyone needs time to process traumatic events. Children often experience disasters differently than adults and they need to have developmentally appropriate explanations of them.

Experiencing the Effects of Disaster

Children can experience the effects of disasters months and years after the events. Some will express the effects outwardly through behaviors. Others will focus internally on their own thoughts and emotions. Typically, boys may misbehave or physically act out, and girls may hold things in. In reality, children of either gender can exhibit one or a mix of these behaviors. Keep in mind that neither response is preferable to the other, and both can have negative effects on a child's development.

Other ways children experience the period of time soon after disasters can also have negative effects.

- Children might find it hard to sleep, have intense nightmares, and even daydream about the disaster. Children may replay, over and over in their minds, the specific events that happened during the disaster.
- Children will often display physical effects of the disaster in the form of headaches, indigestion, stomach aches, and fatigue. While it might be tempting to dismiss these as "all in her head," they are very real effects on the child.

- Infants are not immune to the effects of disaster and can sense the tension around them. Comforting a crying infant, using a soothing voice, and remaining calm can ease a baby's recovery from trauma resulting from a disaster.
- School performance will often decline after a child experiences trauma. This is reflected not only in grade performance, but decreased ability to focus in class, unruliness, and even rudeness to peers and adults.
- Young children are likely to act out the events of the disaster as if in a play. They might use dolls or toys to play the parts of people or things, and they might even be violent with them.
- Young children often cope with trauma by giving the disaster a human personality. For example, a child might think of a tornado as an evil spirit that can revisit them at any time. This can be scary or upsetting for children.
- Children's moods such as immediate sadness, anger, or anxiety, can be easily triggered. In addition, children might mask their emotions as a way of being strong for other family members.
- Some older children can experience deep depression, and some might even attempt or commit suicide.

Not all of the experiences following a natural disaster are negative. Some children prefer to be in school because of its routine and security. Children may develop empathy, compassion, and understand the vulnerability of others more than they did before the disaster. Children can recognize that they have taken their and their family's safety for granted in the past.

Almost all children (and adults) ask "why?" after a traumatic event. This is normal. Parents and other trusted adults should be prepared to address questions and responses to the disaster.

Each child's response to a disaster depends on multiple factors, including the following:

- The extent to which the disaster directly affected them. (For example, were their own lives threatened?)
- What they witnessed happening to other people during the disaster.
- Their level of exposure to news media and on-line video coverage of the disaster.
- The extent to which they were in a functional family before the disaster.
- Exposure to previous disasters or other trauma.
- Previous or resulting therapy, education, or preparation about how to cope with stress.

Parents and other trusted adults should be on the lookout for children who are not coping well after a disaster. In general, children who exhibit a drastic change in behavior need attention. If a child who has always been very outgoing suddenly becomes quiet and withdrawn, he or she could be experiencing long-term effects of trauma. Importantly, if children who once kept to themselves are now outgoing or openly expressive, this can also be an indicator that they are not coping well.

Children who engage in destructive behaviors, whether they target objects, animals, or people, may need some intervention in the form of counseling or therapy. Children may experience panic attacks. Children as young as 10 years old may abuse substances. In addition, changes such as rapid weight gain or loss, complete withdrawal from social activities, poor school performance, chronic health issues, and expressions of feeling personally responsible for the disaster should be addressed with the help of professional counselors.

Feeling Depressed as a Result of Disaster

All adults — especially parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, friends, and siblings — should be aware of both adults and children who are feeling depressed as a result

of a disaster. Although age ranges are provided below, keep in mind that children who are older or younger can experience any of these symptoms of depression.

Signs of depression in early childhood: tantrums, physical complaints, brief periods of sadness, listlessness or hyperactivity, lack of interest in activities, withdrawal.

Signs of depression in middle childhood: new phobias, hyperactivity, conduct disorders (lying, stealing), refusal to attend school, refusal to leave parents, periods of sadness, vague anxiety or agitation, suicidal thoughts.

Signs of depression in adolescents: changes in appearance, withdrawal, fatigue, eating problems, substance abuse, risk-taking, sudden change in peer group, loss of interest, sleep problems, hostility, suicidal thoughts.

If you suspect a child is suffering from depression, suggest that the parents have the child evaluated by a physician or a psychologist. You also might refer the child to a school counselor or social worker.

Responses by Parents, Caregivers, and Trusted Adults

People may struggle to figure out what to say when disaster occurs. Finding the appropriate words when children are not coping well is also challenging. Here are some things you can do to help a child's sense of well-being.

- Reassure the child that you are still together, and that you will be there to help for as long as you can.
- Return to pre-disaster routines to the extent possible. Bedtime, bath time, meal time, and waking up times should all be restored. Ensuring regular daily routine activities helps children feel more secure and safe.
- Make sure you are taking care of yourself. It can be difficult to care for your child when you are not coping well. Reflect on your own behaviors and make sure you are not lashing out, quick to anger, or sad and withdrawn. If you need help coping, seek out a close friend, family member, mental health professional, or clergy and share your feelings.
- Talk with your child about your feelings about the disaster. Let him or her know that you are getting better, too, but that you might also be upset or sad because the events were hard on you,

too. When appropriate, talk about your plans for recovery, financial realities, and things that will be different moving forward. Be sure to keep these at a level the child can understand. Young children cannot grasp many adult concepts, but they can understand that things will change.

- Let children know that experiencing intense and unpredictable responses to disastrous events is natural and normal. While the outbursts can be difficult to manage in the moment, responding with patience and mindfulness go a long way in supporting children recovering from disaster. Validating their sometimes hard to understand feelings of anger and sadness provides children with meaningful support.
- When your role allows, hold and comfort the child. Parents can provide this more readily than teachers, but children can find comfort in the arms of grandparents, uncles and aunts, close family friends, and even siblings. There is no substitute for the warmth, protection, and feeling of safety experienced in the arms of loved ones.
- Create an emergency plan, and let your children know that you have a plan in case the situation ever happens again. Letting children help plan for emergencies can reduce any anxiety they feel about the uncertainty of a future disaster.

Things to Remember

Children and adults experience and adjust to disasters in a variety of ways. It is up to everyone in a community to recognize negative effects, help children cope with disasters, and take care of children and themselves in the aftermath of traumatic events. While the passage of time can help, there is no substitute for patient, caring, honest, and supportive adults helping children who are recovering from traumatic events in their lives.

- When possible, help others who are coping with disasters. Volunteer, provide childcare to volunteers, send food, encouraging letters, and toys or other items to help other families recovering from a disaster.
- Encourage children to draw, write, or tell stories about their experiences. Talking about how the disaster has changed them — their families, as well as their communities — can be beneficial. Children in groups — such as in classrooms, after-school settings, and extracurricular activities — can also benefit from knowing that others are experiencing similar thoughts and feelings.

Adapted by Bradford Wiles, Ph.D., assistant professor and extension specialist, School of Family Studies and Human Services, Kansas State University, bwiles@k-state.edu; and Elizabeth Kiss, Ph.D., assistant professor and extension specialist, School of Family Studies and Human Services, Kansas State University, dekiss4@k-state.edu.

Originally prepared by Joyce Powell, extension assistant, Rural Mental Health Project, Kansas State University.



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