

SAFETY & PREVENTION

Getting Your Family Prepared for a Disaster

What to Tell Your Children about Disasters

It is important to warn children, without overly alarming them, about disasters. Tell children that a disaster (</English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Talking-to-Children-About-Disasters.aspx>) is something that could hurt people or cause damage. Explain that nature sometimes provides “*too much of a good thing*” – fire, rain, or wind. Talk about things that could happen during a storm, like the fact that the lights or phone might not work. Tell children there are many people who can help them during a disaster, so that they will not be afraid of firemen, policemen, paramedics, or other emergency officials.



Teach children:

- How to call for help.
- When to use emergency numbers (</English/health-issues/injuries-emergencies/Pages/Calling-911-How-and-When-to-Call-for-Help.aspx>).
- To call the family contact if they are separated.

Staying Calm in an Emergency

The most important role a parent can play in an emergency situation is to stay calm. Children of all ages can easily pick up on their parents' fears and anxieties. In a disaster, they'll look to you for help and for clues on how to act. If you react with alarm, a child may become more scared. If you seem overcome with a sense of loss, a child may feel their losses more strongly. Experts agree that you should be honest with your children and explain what's going on. Just be sure to base the amount of information and level of detail on what's appropriate for their age level.

Children and Their Response to Disaster

Children depend on daily routines: They wake up, eat breakfast, go to school, and play with friends. When emergencies or disasters interrupt this routine, children may become anxious; not want parents out of their sight/refuse to go to school or child care; or feel guilty that they caused the disaster by something they said or did. Children's fears also may stem from their imagination, and you should take these feelings seriously. Your words and actions can provide reassurance. When talking with your child, be sure to present a realistic picture that is both honest and manageable.

Be aware that after a disaster, children are most afraid that:

- The event will happen again.
- Someone will be injured or killed
- They will be separated from the family
- They will be left alone

Common Child Behaviors after a Disaster

Children may be upset over the loss of a favorite toy, blanket, teddy bear or other items; undergo a personality change—from being quiet, obedient and caring to loud, noisy and aggressive or from outgoing to shy and afraid; have nightmares or be afraid to sleep alone or with the light off; become easily upset, cry or whine; lose trust in adults because the adults in their life were unable to control the disaster; or revert to younger behavior such as bedwetting (</English/ages-stages/toddler/toilet-training/Pages/Bedwetting.aspx>) and thumb sucking (</English/ages-stages/baby/crying-colic/Pages/Pacifiers-and-Thumb-Sucking.aspx>).

Special Needs of Children after a Disaster

Parents should remember that the psychological effects of a natural disaster don't go away once the emergency has passed. Children can suffer from nightmares (</English/ages-stages/preschool/Pages/Nightmares-and-Night-Terrors.aspx>) or other problems for years after a disaster. Children are better able to cope with a traumatic event if parents, teachers and other adults support and help them with their experiences.

Help should start as soon as possible after the event. Some children may never show distress because they don't feel upset, while others may not give evidence of being upset for several weeks or even months. Even if children do not show a change in behavior, they may still need your help. Parents should be on the lookout for signs that their kids need some extra counseling (</English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Pages/Mental-Health-Care-Who%27s-Who.aspx>).

What Parents Can Do to Help Children Cope after a Disaster

Talk with children about how they are feeling and listen without judgment. Let them know they can have their own feelings, which might be different than others. Let children take their time to figure things out and to have their feelings. Don't rush them or pretend that they don't think or feel as they do.

Here are some suggested ways to reduce your child's fear and anxiety:

- Keep the family together as much as possible. While you look for housing and assistance, try to keep the family together and make children a part of what you are doing. Otherwise, children could get anxious and worry that their parents won't return.
- Calmly and firmly explain the situation. As best as you can, tell children what you know about the disaster. Explain what will happen next. For example, say, "Tonight, we will all stay together in the shelter." Get down to the child's eye level and talk to them.
- Encourage children to talk. Let them talk about the disaster and ask questions as much as they want. Encourage children to describe what they're feeling. Help them learn to use words that express their feelings, such as happy, sad, angry, mad and scared. Just be sure the words fit their feelings—not yours.
- Listen to what they say. If possible, include the entire family in the discussion. Reassure them that the disaster was not their fault in any way. Assure fearful children that you will be there to take care of them. Children should not be expected to be brave or tough, or to "not cry."
- Include children in recovery activities. Give children chores that are their responsibility. This will help children feel they are part of the recovery. Having tasks help children feel empowered and give them a way to feel in control and useful.
- Go back as soon as possible to former routines. Maintain a regular schedule for children.
- Let them have some control, such as choosing what outfit to wear or what meal to have for dinner.
- Allow special privileges such as leaving the light on when they sleep for a period of time after the disaster.
- Find ways to emphasize to the children that you love them.

Turn off the TV

Once you arrive at a shelter, hotel, or a relative's home, disaster related TV programs should be restricted. News coverage of disasters ([/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Talking-To-Children-About-Tragedies-and-Other-News-Events.aspx](#))—especially if children see their own town or school on TV—can be traumatic to children of all ages. If children watch TV coverage of the disaster, parents should watch with them and talk about it afterwards.

Activities to Get Children Talking about a Disaster

Encourage children to draw or paint pictures of how they feel about their experiences. Write a story together of the event. You might start with: Once upon a time there was a terrible _____ and it scared us all _____. This is what happened: _____. End the story with how things are getting better.

How to Get Your Family Ready Before a Disaster

It's important for all family members to know how to react in an emergency, because when a disaster strikes, you may need to act quickly. Discuss possible disaster plans with your children—in a very general way—so that they will know what to do in various situations. For example, if you live in a part of the country that is prone to tornadoes, it is important for your children to know what to do if a tornado is coming. Remember that it is possible that you and your children may be in different places when a disaster strikes; for example at school and work. Also, older children may be home alone when faced with an emergency.

Create a Family Disaster Plan

You can create a Family Disaster Plan by taking some simple steps. It's important for all family members to know how to react in an emergency because the best protection is knowing what to do.

- Talk with your children about the dangers of disasters that are likely in your area and how to prepare for each type.
- Make sure they know where to go in your home to stay safe during an earthquake ([/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Earthquake-Disaster-Fact-Sheet.aspx](#)), tornado ([/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Tornado-Disaster-Fact-Sheet.aspx](#)), hurricane ([/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Hurricane-Disaster-Fact-Sheet.aspx](#)), or other disasters likely for your area.
- Teach your child how to recognize danger signals. Make sure your child knows what smoke detectors, fire alarms and local community warning systems (horns, sirens) sound like and what to do when they hear them.
- Explain to children how and when to call for help. Keep emergency phone numbers (*your local Emergency Phone Number List*) where family members can find them.
- Pick an out-of-state family contact person who family members can "check-in" with if you are separated during an emergency. For children who are old enough help them to memorize the person's name and phone number, or give them a copy of the emergency list included in the kit.
- Agree on a meeting place away from your home (*a neighbor or relative's house or even a street corner*) where you would get together if you were separated in an emergency. Give each family member an emergency list with the name, address and phone number of the meeting place. For children who are old enough help them to memorize the person's name, address and phone number.
- Put together a disaster supplies kit for your family.
- Practice your Family Disaster Plan every six months so that everyone will remember what to do when in an emergency.

It's important for all family members to know how to react in an emergency because the best protection is knowing what to do.

Kids Get Ready Kit

Assemble a special "Get Ready Kit" for kids. Explain to your children that you might need to leave your house during a disaster and sleep somewhere else for a while.

Here are some items you can your children could put into a backpack or container so it will be ready if needed:

- A few favorite books, crayons, and paper.
- Favorite small toys like dolls or action figures.
- A board game.
- A deck of cards.
- A puzzle.
- A favorite stuffed animal.
- A favorite blanket or pillow.
- A picture of your family and pets.
- A box with special treasures that will help you feel safe.

Pets

Most shelters can't take pets, so plan what to do in case you have to evacuate. Call your local Humane Society to ask if there is an animal shelter in your area. Prepare a list of kennels and veterinarians who could shelter them in an emergency. Keep a list of "pet friendly" motels outside your area.

Disaster Supplies

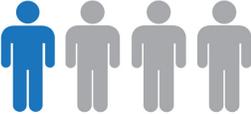
Every family should have disaster supplies in their home. Needed supplies include food, water and other things that you might need in an emergency. In a hurricane, earthquake, or flood ([/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/flash-flood-recovery.aspx](#)), you could be without electricity for a week or more, or the water supply may be polluted. There also may be times, such as during a flood or a heavy winter storm, that you might not be able to leave your house for a few days. Your family may never need to use your disaster supplies, but it's always best to be prepared. To make getting these items fun, you could have a family "Scavenger Hunt" and have family members see how many of these items they can find in your home.

PREPARING YOUR CHILD FOR DISASTERS

DEVELOP A PLAN FOR HOW YOUR FAMILY WOULD RESPOND TO A DISASTER, AND TALK WITH YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT IT. THIS CONVERSATION COULD KEEP THEM SAFE IN AN EMERGENCY. AFTER A DISASTER, YOUR CHILDREN WILL LOOK TO YOU TO HELP THEM COPE.

NEARLY
14%
OF CHILDREN AGES
2 TO 17
HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO A
DISASTER
IN THEIR LIVES

ACCORDING TO DISASTERS: VICTIMIZATION AND CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH. CHILD DEV. 2012


ABOUT **25%** OF CHILDREN EXPOSED TO A
DISASTER
REPORTED SYMPTOMS SUGGESTING DISORDERS SUCH AS
**PTSD, ANXIETY, DEPRESSION
AND PANIC ATTACKS**

PSYCHOLOGY TODAY. AMERICANS IN NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS. CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH AFTER SEPTEMBER 11. ARCH 2008. PSYCHIATRY. 2005

TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN IN ADVANCE OF A DISASTER



PREPARE CHILDREN
WITHOUT OVERLY
ALARMING THEM



DETERMINE
WHO YOUR
OUT-OF-TOWN CONTACT
WILL BE



HAVE A FAMILY PLAN



AGREE ON A MEETING LOCATION,
IN CASE YOU CANNOT GO
HOME

KNOW WHAT TO SAY TO YOUR CHILD AT THE TIME OF DISASTER

- **ASK** YOUR CHILD WHAT THEY'VE ALREADY HEARD.
- **SHARE** BASIC INFORMATION. NOT GRAPHIC DETAILS.
- KEEP YOUNG CHILDREN **AWAY** FROM REPETITIVE GRAPHIC IMAGES/SOUNDS ON TV, THE RADIO, AND ONLINE.
- CONSIDER RECORDING THE NEWS FOR OLDER CHILDREN, SO YOU CAN PREVIEW THE CONTENTS AND **WATCH IT WITH THEM.**



FOR MORE INFORMATION,
VISIT AAP.ORG/DISASTERS
AND
HEALTHYCHILDREN.ORG

Additional Information:

- 5 Easy Ways to Prepare Your Pet for a Disaster (<http://www.community.fema.gov/connect.ti/readynpm/messageshowthread?threadid=52142>) (FEMA.gov)
- Family Disaster Supplies List
- Talking to Children About Disasters (/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Talking-to-Children-About-Disasters.aspx)
- Talking To Children about Tragedies and Other News Events (/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Talking-To-Children-About-Tragedies-and-Other-News-Events.aspx)

- Understanding Disasters (/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Understanding-Disasters.aspx)
- Communicating with Children and Families: From Everyday Interactions to Skill in Conveying Distressing Information (<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/121/5/e1441.abstract>) (AAP)
- Tips for Talking to Children after a Disaster (<http://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SMA11-DISASTER/SMA11-DISASTER-09.pdf>) (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)
- Talking to Children about Earthquakes and Other Natural Disasters (<http://www.aacap.org/galleries/DisasterResponse/Talking%20to%20Children%20about%20Earthquakes%20and%20other%20Natural%20Disasters.pdf>) (AACAP)
- How to Help Kids Feel Safe After Tragedy (<http://www.pbs.org/parents/talkingwithkids/news/help-kids-feel-safe.html>) (PBS/Sesame Street Family Connections)
- How to Help Kids Cope After a Disaster (<http://ehealthmd.com/content/how-help-kids-cope-after-disaster#axzz2Qvf6ud21>) (eHealthMD)

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Source Adapted from Family Readiness Kit: Preparing to Handle Disasters, 2nd Edition

The information contained on this Web site should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

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