



# Helping Your Child Cope After a Disaster<sup>1</sup>



**C**hildren can cope more effectively with a disaster when they feel they understand what is happening and what they can do. Providing basic information may help them cope. However, programs should be careful not to provide unnecessary details that may only alarm them.

For preschool-aged children, it may be comforting to provide a simple explanation of what happened and how it will affect them (e.g., a tree branch fell on electrical wires and that is why the lights don't work). Let children know there are many people who are working to help them and their community to recover after a disaster (such as repair crews for the electric company, or firefighters, police, paramedics, or other emergency personnel). Share steps that are being taken to keep them safe; children will often worry that a disaster will occur again.

Older children will likely want, and benefit from, additional information about the disaster and recovery efforts. No matter what age, start by asking children what they already know and what questions they have and use that as a guide for the conversation.

## Help Children Cope

After a disaster or crisis, children benefit from adults who can help them learn how to cope effectively. Although it is not useful for adults to appear overwhelmed by the event, it is helpful to share some of their feelings and what they are doing to deal with those feelings. Allow children to “own” their feelings. Let your child know that it is all right to be upset about something bad that happened. Use the conversation to talk about other troubling feelings your child may have. A child who feels afraid is afraid, even if adults think the reason for the fear is unnecessary. If you

<sup>1</sup>Material adapted from:

American Academy of Pediatrics. Talking to Children about Disasters. <http://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/Children-and-Disasters/Pages/Talking-to-Children-About-Disasters.aspx>

News You Can Use: Disaster Readiness and Response for Families with Young Children Office of Head Start

American Academy of Pediatrics [healthychildren.org](http://healthychildren.org). [Responding to Children's Emotional Needs During Times of Crisis](http://healthychildren.org/Response-to-Children's-Emotional-Needs-During-Times-of-Crisis)

Promoting Adjustment and Helping Children Cope at <http://www.aap.org/disasters/adjustment>

feel overwhelmed and/or hopeless, look for some support from other adults before reaching out to your child.

Children, just like adults, often feel helpless after a disaster. Help them figure out what they can do—that is meaningful to them—to help others in their community who are affected by the disaster.<sup>2</sup>

You can take the following actions to help your child after a disaster or crisis. They are useful tips even if your child was not directly affected by an event.

**Help your child feel safe:** One of the most important things parents or caregivers can do is to help their child feel safe.

**Provide reassurance:** Reassure children that steps are being taken to keep them safe. This can be done by pointing out things that are in place to keep them safe.

**Restore the child's normal routine:** As soon as you can, go back to a normal routine. This means doing things like singing songs if you always sing songs with your child. Or read stories at the time you usually do. Bedtime and mealtime at familiar times are very helpful to children. Children function better when they know what to expect. Keep in mind that you do not want to force children to return to all routines if they are unable to do so because of their distress. Helping children understand and process events is also important.

**Express feelings:** Infants and toddlers may express themselves differently. They may cry more. They may be harder to soothe. They may become more fussy. Holding and cuddling may soothe your child. Soft music may soothe infants. Toddlers may have more temper tantrums. They may want to cling to you. Preschool and older children may like to draw or tell stories to express their feelings.

**Ask questions:** Parents and caregivers should ask children if they have questions or concerns. This helps children know that it is ok to talk. If your child asks questions, allow the child's questions to lead the discussion. If your child does not have questions, do not push. He or she may be more willing to talk later.

**Share information:** Explain events as simply and directly as possible. Because every child is different, take cues from your child as to how much information to share. Remember that even young children will hear about major events and that it is best to hear about them from a parent or caregiver and not the media.



**Acknowledge losses:** Children are not only trying to deal with the disaster, but with everything else that follows. They may have to relocate, at least temporarily, and could be separated from friends or unable to attend the same school. Parents may have less income and the change in finances may change daily activities. Allow children to express their regrets over these “secondary losses.”

**Have fun:** Find ways to have fun with your child or to be silly together. If your child likes to play peek-a-boo or play a favorite game, do those things. Laughter can be healing.

**Reconnect with community:** Take care of yourself. This will help you take care of your child. Find ways to get support. Talking with others can be helpful. If you notice changes in yourself, seek help from your Head Start/Early Head Start program.

**Be flexible and patient:** Getting back to “normal” can take a while. Take care of yourself.

**Limit exposure to media coverage of the event:** Images of the disaster or crisis on the TV, internet, radio, newspaper, and other social media may frighten or stress children more. Avoid or limit children's exposure to distressing pictures in the media.

<sup>2</sup>For more information, see “Promoting adjustment and helping children cope” at: <http://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/Children-and-Disasters/Pages/Talking-to-Children-About-Disasters.aspx#sthash.UF4Gso0i.dpuf>