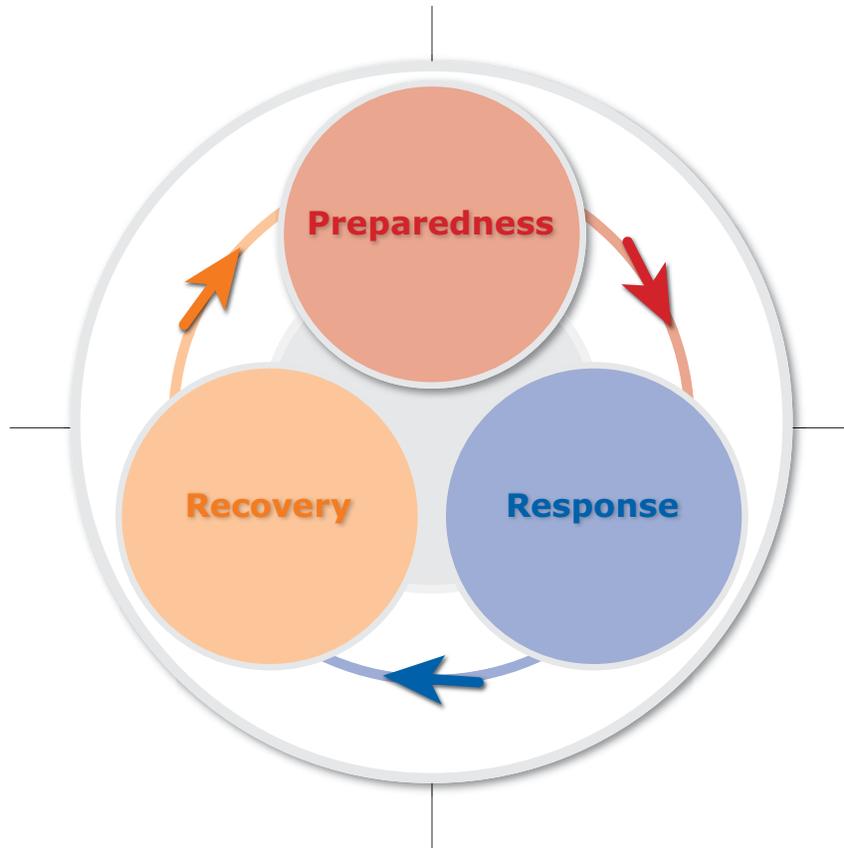


# Head Start Emergency Preparedness Manual: 2015 Edition



## Responding to Crises and Tragic Events: Information and Handouts



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Administration for Children and Families  
Office of Head Start

*School readiness begins with health!*



# Supplemental Resource to the Head Start Emergency Preparedness Manual: 2015 Edition

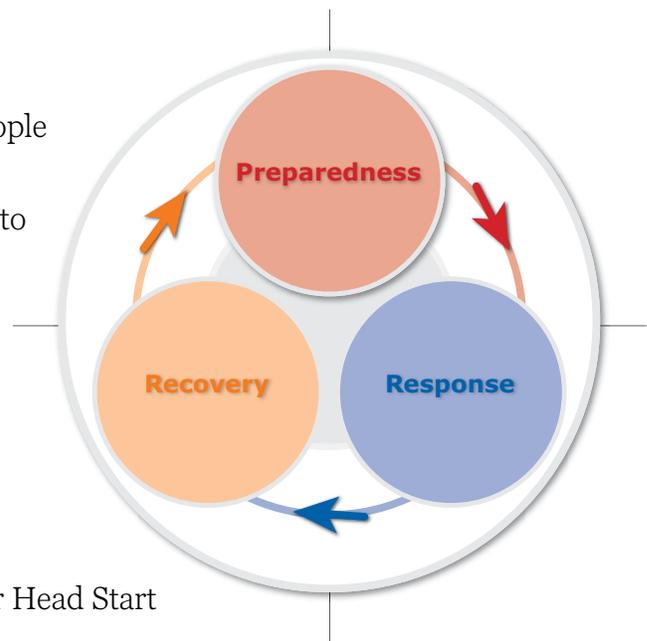
## Introduction

When school shootings, community violence, and natural disasters like hurricanes or floods occur, people often seek resources to help them respond.

These tip sheets and sample letters were developed to help you respond to the needs of staff and families. These resources can be used if your program has been directly affected by a crisis. They can also be used if a recent event in the news has raised awareness of the need for emergency planning. They are designed for you to use and adapt to your unique situation.

During emergencies:

- Parents and staff may need reassurance that their Head Start program has plans in place
- Parents and staff may need reassurance that their program is a source of support



This is a supplement to the Head Start Emergency Preparedness Manual, 2015 Edition available on the Office of Head Start website (<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/health/ep>) and your program's emergency preparedness plans. You should also review related [Head Start Program Performance Standards](#). The Head Start Emergency Preparedness Manual, 2015 Edition contains information on specific Head Start Program Performance Standards that are specific to emergency preparedness. Reviewing these resources will help you prepare for and respond to the needs of staff and parents after an emergency.

This resource gives you information and tip sheets to help you with the following:

- Providing an environment that reduces the risk of injury to children and staff within the center
- Assuring parents and staff that plans are in place to keep all children and staff safe during a crisis
- Providing assurance and support to families and staff when a crisis or tragic event occurs nearby
- Supporting children, staff, and families recovering from a crisis or tragic event

In addition to the materials provided here, mental health consultants should also be used to help you with any concerns you have about how to best support your staff, and the children and families you serve.

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**Please note that if your program has been directly affected by a tragic event or crisis, you should refer to your emergency plans in addition to these supplemental materials.**

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Other helpful resources not included in this document are as follows:

- The Head Start [emergency preparedness website](#) provides more information about emergency preparedness, response and recovery
- The Administration for Children and Families [Office of Human Services Emergency Preparedness and Response \(OHSEPR\)](#) provides resources for emergency preparedness, response, and recovery

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# Key Terms

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## **Crises and tragic events:**

Events like school shootings, community violence, and natural disasters (hurricanes, floods, tornados). These may also be acts of terrorism or random acts of violence.

## **Terrorism:**

The use of force or violence against persons or property in violation of the criminal laws of the United States for purposes of intimidation, coercion, or ransom.<sup>1</sup>

## **Psychological First Aid (PFA):**

The support and care given to children and adults after a crisis or tragic event to help with short- and long-term coping skills.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>FEMA. [Are You Ready? An In-depth Guide to Citizen Preparedness](#)

<sup>2</sup>NCTSN. *Psychological First Aid Field Operations Guide*.

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## A. Assisting Staff

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**W**hen a tragic event happens staff may need support to cope.

Programs should talk with their mental health consultant about support services available to help them. Programs may also want to find a pediatrician who can help address their children's needs during or after a public health emergency or disaster. Coordinating with community providers should be done prior to any event to ensure mental health services are available when needed.

The tip sheets and sample letters that follow are for you to share with your staff members. They can also be used to let your staff know about the emotional impact of crises on children and families.

Please note that before sharing information with children in the classroom, your program should make sure that parents are aware that this will take place and what their children will be told so that they have time to express any concerns about what will be shared.

Topics include:

- Staff reactions to crisis or tragic events
- Strategies for coping with a disaster or crisis
- Supporting staff affected by a disaster or crisis
- Recognizing signs of stress in families and staff

The resource section includes links to psychological first aid (PFA) resources and the role it plays during a tragic event. The American Academy of Pediatrics website (<http://www.aap.org/disasters/adjustment>) and the National Child Traumatic Stress Network at <http://www.nctsn.org/content/psychological-first-aid> also have information on PFA.

Materials in the “Assisting Families” section may also be useful for staff members whose own families have been affected by a tragic event or crisis.

A. Assisting Staff

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## Tip Sheet for Staff Members Who May Be Affected By a Crisis or Tragic Event

### Staff Reactions to Crisis or Tragic Events<sup>1</sup>

In the days and weeks after a tragic event or crisis you may feel a range of feelings and emotions. These include:

- Denial about what is going on
- Irritability that can lead to moodiness and trigger negative reactions
- Anxiety about facing the day
- Anxiety about what the future holds
- Sleeplessness
- Having difficulty with familiar tasks
- Inability to concentrate
- Anger at inability to find a solution
- Anger at inability to change events
- Withdrawal from friends or co-workers
- Exhaustion that makes it almost impossible to get things done
- Depression
- Health problems that take their toll, mentally and physically

There are people and agencies that can help you find resources to help you and your staff cope. These include:

- Your program’s mental health consultant
- Physician(s) from your Health Services Advisory Committee
- Community faith-based organizations
- Volunteer agencies
- Community mental health providers

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), state, tribal, and local governments of the affected area may also provide crisis counseling assistance. See section on “Strategies for Coping with a Disaster or Crisis” for more information.

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from the [U.S. Army and Youth Services MAC Handbook](#)

A. Assisting Staff

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## Tip Sheet for Staff Members Who May Be Affected By a Crisis or Tragic Event

### Strategies for Coping with a Disaster or Crisis

After a disaster or crisis, many people look for ways to cope. The National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/>) offers the following coping strategies designed to assist adults after a disaster, tragic event, or crisis:

- Spend time with people who give you support
- Talk about how you are feeling
- Listen to others
- Take time to grieve and cry if you need to cry
- Ask for support and help from family, friends, church, or other community resources
- Join or start a support group
- Tackle one task at a time instead of trying to do everything at once
- Set aside tasks that are not necessary
- Eat healthy
- Take time to walk, stretch, exercise, and relax
- Make sure you get enough rest and sleep. You may need more sleep than usual
- Do something that makes you feel good:
  - Take a warm bath or a walk
  - Get back to everyday routines. Habits can be comforting
  - Sit in the sun
  - Play with a pet
- Volunteer in the recovery efforts:
  - Give blood
  - Help raise money
  - Collect necessary emergency checklist items for victims
- Turn off the TV

Your program's mental health consultant or a local physician may assist you in finding resources. Local faith-based organizations, voluntary agencies, or professionals may also be used. FEMA, state, tribal, and local governments of the affected area may provide crisis counseling assistance as well.

A. Assisting Staff

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## Tip Sheet for Staff Members Who May Be Affected By a Tragic Event or Crisis

### Supporting Staff Members Affected by a Disaster or Crisis<sup>1</sup>

Staff members may find their own families in upheaval during a tragic event or crisis. This means they may also need a support system and assistance along with your program's families.

Some staff members may not have been directly affected. However, working with children and families who have been affected can be hard physically and emotionally. The following tips can help staff members provide support for children and families during a disaster or crisis:

- Make sure staff members can handle their work schedule
  - Consider schedule changes, if needed
  - Plan for time when staff members will need to go home and take care of family needs
  - Talk about the need for staff members to have their own family or personal preparedness plan
  - Establish a permissive leave policy so that staff members who are stressed can take time off
  - Provide support and understanding to staff members who are single parents (or parents who are geographically separated and may now have sole responsibility for children)
- Be aware of changing family situations. Tempers can be short and emotional displays may occur
  - Remember that understanding and a sympathetic ear can be very helpful
  - Offer light-hearted social opportunities, such as potluck dinners and movies
  - Help establish a support group for staff and families. Encourage peer support when it is appropriate
  - Encourage staff and their families to attend support groups and meetings
  - Offer extended breaks for staff members working longer hours
  - Subsidize substitute staff members to offer respite for staff members
  - Encourage staff self-care
  - Encourage and offer information about stress management tools
  - Help staff members learn to self-monitor and pace their efforts including:
    - When they need to take a break
    - How to talk to their supervisor about their workload and need to lighten their load

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from [U.S. Army Child and Youth Services MAC Handbook](#)

A. Assisting Staff

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## Tip Sheet for Staff Members Who May Be Affected By a Tragic Event or Crisis

### Recognizing Signs of Stress in Families and Staff<sup>1</sup>

The emotional toll that disaster brings can go beyond the financial strains of damage and loss of home, business, or personal property. Even those who experience a disaster “second-hand” through extensive media coverage can be affected.

It is important to remember the following:

- Everyone who sees or experiences a disaster is affected in some way
- It is normal to feel anxious about your own safety and that of your family and friends
- Sadness, grief, and anger are normal reactions to an abnormal event
- Acknowledging your feelings helps you to recover
- It is common to feel frustrated because you cannot help directly in rescue or recovery
- A tragic event can bring up feelings from past crises or events
- Focusing on your strengths and abilities helps you heal
- Accepting help is healthy
- Everyone has different needs and different ways of coping
- It is common to feel anger or resentment at people or situations that have caused pain

When adults experience the following common reactions to traumatic experiences they might benefit from counseling or stress management assistance:

- Difficulty communicating thoughts
- Difficulty sleeping
- Difficulty keeping balance in their lives
- Low threshold of frustration
- Increased use of drugs/alcohol
- Limited attention span
- Poor work performance
- Headaches or stomach problems
- Tunnel vision or muffled hearing
- Confusion
- Trouble concentrating
- Not wanting to leave home or not wanting to go home
- Depression or sadness
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Mood-swings and bouts of crying
- Overwhelming guilt or self-doubt
- Fear of crowds, strangers, or being alone

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from FEMA [“Recovering from Disaster”](#)

### A. Assisting Staff

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#### Tip Sheet for Staff Members Who May Be Affected By a Tragic Event or Crisis Recognizing Signs of Stress in Families and Staff continued

The following are ways to help ease disaster- or crisis-related stress:

- Talk about your feelings
- Get help from professional counselors who deal with post-disaster stress
- Do not hold yourself responsible for the disaster or tragic event
- Promote your own physical and emotional healing by healthy eating, rest, exercise, relaxation, and meditation and self-reflection
- Try to keep a normal daily routine
- Limit demanding responsibilities
- Spend time with family and friends
- Take part in memorials. (It is also ok not to attend memorials)
- Use community supports and networks of family, friends, and religious institutions

There are people and agencies that can help you find resources. These include:

- Your program's mental health consultant
- Physician(s) from your Health Services Advisory Committee
- Community faith-based organizations
- Volunteer agencies

Federal, state, tribal, and local governments of the affected area may also provide crisis counseling assistance.

A. Assisting Staff

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## Tip Sheet for Staff Members Who May have Children in Their Program Affected by a Crisis or Tragic Event

### Children's Responses to Crises or Tragic Event<sup>1</sup>

Infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and young children who experience a tragic event may show changes in their behaviors. They may also be indirectly affected by a crisis by what they see on the TV or hear.

The most important role you can play in an emergency situation is to stay calm. Children of all ages easily pick up on adults and others' fears and anxieties. This may cause changes in behaviors.

Children, no matter what their age, do not always have the words to tell you how they are feeling. They may not know how to talk about what has happened. Their behavior can be a better sign. Sudden changes in behavior can mean they have been exposed to trauma or a crisis.

#### What you might see:

- Problems sleeping, including not wanting to sleep alone, having a hard time at naptime or bedtime, not wanting to sleep or repeatedly waking up, nightmares
- Separation anxiety, including not wanting to be away from you, not wanting to go to school, crying or complaining when the parent(s) leave(s)
- Not eating

- Not being able to do things they used to do
- More cranky behaviors
- Being more stubborn than usual
- Wanting things only done his/her way
- Social regression
- Increased complaints (headaches, stomachaches)
- Intense preoccupation with the details of the event
- Wanting to always talk about what happened
- Fear that the event might happen again
- Not paying attention, being restless
- Moody, depressed, or irritable
- Playing in violent ways
- Hitting you or others
- More tantrums
- Clinginess with teachers or caregivers
- Regression, or going back to an earlier stage of development
  - Bedwetting or other toileting issues
  - Baby talk
  - Wanting to be carried or rocked
- Re-creating the event, without prompting by staff or mental health consultant
  - Playing out or drawing the event
- Infants may be irritable/difficult to soothe or easily startled

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

National Child Traumatic Stress Network Schools Committee. (October 2008). *Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators*. Los Angeles, CA & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress

National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Parent Tips for Helping Infants and Toddlers after Disasters. Available at [http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/pfa/english/appendix\\_e4\\_tips\\_for\\_parents\\_with\\_infants\\_and\\_toddlers.pdf](http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/pfa/english/appendix_e4_tips_for_parents_with_infants_and_toddlers.pdf).

Healthychildren.org. What to tell your children about disasters. <http://www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Getting-Your-Family-Prepared-for-a-Disaster.aspx>

Federal Emergency Response Agency. Helping Children Cope with Disaster <http://www.fema.gov/news-release/2005/10/14/helping-children-cope-disaster>

### A. Assisting Staff

#### Tip Sheet for Staff Members Who May have Children in Their Program Affected by a Crisis or Tragic Event

#### Children's Responses to Crisis or Tragic Event continued

- Overreacting to minor bumps or falls
- Over- or under-reacting to physical contact, sudden movements, or loud sounds such as sirens and slamming doors
- Anxiety and worry
- New fears and/or fears about safety
- Asking questions and making statements about the event
- American Academy of Pediatrics Promoting Adjustment and Helping Children Cope <http://www.aap.org/disasters/adjustment>
- The Youngest Victims: Disaster Preparedness to Meet Children's Needs at <http://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/Children-and-Disasters/Documents/Youngest-Victims-Final.pdf>
- Office of the Administration for Children & Families Early Childhood Disaster-Related Resources <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohsepr/early-childhood>
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network <http://www.nctsn.org>

#### What you might see (in addition to those listed above) in older siblings:

- Strong angry or sad feelings
- Acting out in school
- Poor grades
- Fighting with friends
- Wanting to be alone
- Behaving as if he or she has no feelings
- Disobeying, talking back, or getting into fights
- Drinking or using drugs, hanging out in groups, and getting into trouble

Additional information about children's responses to trauma and disasters is available from the following resources:

If you see changes in your child, tell your child's teacher or home visitor. It is important that you and your child get support. Your Head Start/ Early Head Start teacher and/or mental health consultant can help you find resources that can help your younger and older children.

A. Assisting Staff

## Tip Sheet for Staff Members Who May Be Working with Children Affected by a Crisis or Tragic Event

### Helping Children Cope After a Disaster<sup>1</sup>

Children 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, 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 for adults to share some of their feelings and what they are doing to deal with those feelings. Allow children to “own” their feelings. Let children know that it is all right to be upset about something bad that happened. Use the conversation to talk about other troubling feelings children may have. It is important for the program to inform families when discussions around trauma are taking place. Staff should also have conversations with parents if a child is expressing or showing signs of anxiety or fear.

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 affected by the disaster.

The following are actions you can take to help children after a disaster or crisis. They are also useful tips even if children were not directly affected by an event.

**Help preschool-aged children feel safe:** One of the most important things Head Start staff members can do is help the children they serve feel safe while in the program. This may mean playing calming music to start the day or choosing some favorite comforting toys for playtime.

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

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

American Academy of Pediatrics healthychildren.org. <https://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/children-and-disasters/Documents/Responding-to-Childrens-Emotional-Needs.pdf>

American Academy of Pediatrics. Promoting Adjustment and Helping Children Cope. <http://www.aap.org/disasters/adjustment>

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

### A. Assisting Staff

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#### Tip Sheet for Staff Members Who May Be Working with Children Affected by a Crisis or Tragic Event

##### Helping Children Cope After a Disaster continued

**Provide reassurance:** Reassure children that steps are being taken to keep them safe while at the center. 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. Read stories during circle time and do your best to do activities at their usual times. Familiar routines are comforting. Naptime and mealtime are familiar times that are especially 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 or become more fussy. Spending additional time cuddling infants or playing with preschoolers who are struggling may be helpful. Toddlers may have more temper tantrums. They may want to cling to you. Drawing may allow preschool-aged children to tell stories to express their feelings.

**Ask questions:** After a disaster, preschool aged children may have questions or concerns about what happened. Asking children if they have concerns lets children know that it is ok to talk. If a child in your program asks questions, allow the child’s questions to lead the discussion. It is also important to let the parent know what questions were asked and what information was shared. If children do not have questions, do not push. They 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 the children in your program 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 or be silly with the children in your program. If children like to play peek-a-boo or play a favorite game, do so. Laughter can be healing.

**Reconnect with community.** Take care of yourself. This will help you take care of the children. Find ways to get support through your center or community. Talking with others can be helpful. If you notice changes in yourself, seek help.

**Be flexible and patient:** Getting back to “normal” can take a while. It is important for those who take care of others to also take care of themselves.

**Limit exposure to media coverage of the event:** Screen time in Head Start programs is limited. Programs should avoid situations where images of the disaster or crisis are seen or talked about around children.

*School readiness begins with health!*

### A. Assisting Staff

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# Sample Letter: To Staff Affected by a Crisis or Tragic Event<sup>1</sup>

Dear *[insert]*:

The *[insert event/crisis]* has touched many people's lives. You and your family may feel stress from the effects of this crisis on your health, work, or peace of mind. Stress may show up in ways that may not seem to have anything to do with what has recently happened. You or your children may not know how to talk about feelings of anxiety and fears.

There are a number of ways you can provide support to your children and take care of yourself during this difficult time.

- Promote your own physical and emotional healing by healthy eating, rest, exercise, relaxation, meditation, and self-reflection and do the same for your children
- Try to keep a normal daily routine
- Limit demanding responsibilities
- Spend time with family and friends
- Find someone you trust to help with your personal concerns. (See the information at the end of this letter.)
- Limit television and other media viewing about the disaster or crisis
- Encourage children to ask questions

Signs that you may be feeling stress include:

- Denial about what is going on
- Irritability leading to moodiness and triggering negative responses and reactions
- Anxiety about facing another day
- Anxiety about what the future holds
- Sleeplessness
- Familiar tasks may seem hard to do because of an inability to concentrate
- Anger from inability to find a solution
- Anger at inability to change the events
- Withdrawal from friends or co-workers
- Exhaustion that makes it almost impossible to get things done

Signs that infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in your home may be feeling stress include:

- Problems sleeping (not wanting to go to bed, not wanting to sleep alone, having a hard time at naptime or bedtime, repeatedly waking up, nightmares)
- Crying or complaining whenever you leave and not wanting to be away from you
- Eating problems or changes such as eating too much or not eating

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from a sample take home letter for parents from the National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention.

### A. Assisting Staff

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#### Sample Letter: To Staff Affected by a Crisis or Tragic Event continued

- Playing in violent ways
- Separation anxiety including clinginess toward teachers, caregivers, or yourself, not wanting to go to school
- Regression, or going back to an earlier stage of development (bedwetting or other toileting issues, baby talk, desiring to be carried or rocked, not being able to do things she/he used to do, social regression)
- Lack of developmental progress or not growing and learning like other children of their age
- Re-creating the event (playing out or drawing the event, repeatedly talking about it)
- Increased complaints (headaches, stomachaches)
- Overreacting to minor bumps or falls
- Changes in behavior (not wanting to eat, angry outbursts, decreased attention, withdrawal)

Signs of stress that you might see in your older children and siblings, include (in addition to those above):

- Not paying attention, being restless
- Moody, depressed, or irritable
- Getting lower grades or skipping school
- Disobeying, talking back, or getting into fights
- Drinking or using drugs, hanging out in groups and getting into trouble

Some of these behaviors may be normal signs of growing, but big changes in these behaviors can be signs of stress. Even when you see changes, you may not know what to do or how to cope with them. We can get help to support you.

If you are feeling very anxious or angry, or are struggling, the following resources are available to assist you:

*[Insert contact information for your staff if they want to get support—contacting mental health consultants, health professionals, etc.]*

Our hearts go out to you during this time.

The *[Head Start Program]* is here to support you and your family during this difficult time. Please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

*[Insert name]*

A. Assisting Staff

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## Sample Letter: To Staff When a Tragic Event Is Receiving Wide or Local Media Coverage

Dear Staff:

In light of the tragedy in *[insert town]*, we are reviewing and updating our safety plans. Please be assured that our program has safety plans in place. *[Insert how staff can review your program's plans]*.

The attached handout gives you information on how people sometimes react to the news of a tragedy. If you have any concerns about our safety plans, let us know. If you want to get help coping with tragic events or to volunteer in relief efforts, let us know.

This is also a good time to make sure that we have your current emergency contact information. If anything has changed, share your new information with us. This way our records will be up to date.

Our hearts go out to the families affected by this terrible event.

Sincerely,

*[Insert Name]*

Attach handouts

## B. Assisting Families

**W**hen a program is directly or indirectly affected by a tragic event families may need support.

If your program has been directly affected, refer to your emergency plans. This resource is a supplement to the plans you have in place.

Programs should work with their mental health consultant to find support services to assist families. You may also want to find a pediatrician who can help you address children's needs during or after a crisis.

For information on how to obtain mental health services for families, see "Facilitating a Referral for Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families Within Early Head Start and Head Start," available at <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/health/mental-health/ec-mental-health-consultation/facilitatingare.htm>. To learn more about the pediatrician's role in disaster preparedness, refer to the AAP Children & Disasters website at <http://www.aap.org/disasters>.

After a tragic event, people often want to know that emergency plans are in place if something happens. For those not directly affected, it is a good time to update contact information. It is also a good time to remind parents to let staff know of changes or concerns they have about their child.

These resources are for you to share with families and staff members. Materials in the "Assisting Staff" section may also be adapted for parents or other adults.

### Tip Sheets:

- Children's Responses to Crises and Tragic Events
- Helping Your Child Cope with Disasters

### Sample Letters:

- Sample letter: To families affected by a crisis or tragic event
- Sample letter: Reassuring parents that emergency plans are in place after a crisis or tragic event

**B. Assisting Families**

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## Tip Sheet for Parents and Other Family Members Caring for Children

### Children's Responses to Crises and Tragic Events<sup>1</sup>

Infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and young children who experience a tragic event may show changes in their behaviors. They may also be indirectly affected by a crisis by what they see on the TV or hear.

The most important role you can play as a parent in an emergency situation is to stay calm. Children of all ages easily pick up on their parents or other's fears and anxieties. This may cause changes in behaviors.

Children, no matter what their age, do not always have the words to tell you how they are feeling. They may not know how to talk about what has happened. Their behavior can be a better sign. Sudden changes in behavior can mean they have been exposed to trauma or a crisis.

#### What you might see:

- Problems sleeping, including not wanting to sleep alone, having a hard time at naptime or bedtime, not wanting to sleep or repeatedly waking up, nightmares
- Separation anxiety, including not wanting to be away from you, not wanting to go to school, and crying or complaining when you leave

- Not eating
- Not being able to do things they used to do
- More cranky behaviors
- Being more stubborn than usual
- Wanting things only done his/her way
- Social regression
- Increased complaints (headaches, stomachaches)
- Intense preoccupation with the details of the event
- Wanting to always talk about what happened
- Fear that the event might happen again
- Not paying attention, being restless
- Moody, depressed, or irritable
- Playing in violent ways
- Hitting you or others
- More tantrums
- Clinginess with teachers or caregivers
- Regression, or going back to an earlier stage of development
  - Bedwetting or other toileting issues
  - Baby talk
  - Wanting to be carried or rocked

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

National Child Traumatic Stress Network Schools Committee. (October 2008). *Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators*. Los Angeles, CA & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress

National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Parent Tips for Helping Infants and Toddlers after Disasters. Available at [http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/pfa/english/appendix\\_e4\\_tips\\_for\\_parents\\_with\\_infants\\_and\\_toddlers.pdf](http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/pfa/english/appendix_e4_tips_for_parents_with_infants_and_toddlers.pdf).

Healthychildren.org. What to tell your children about disasters. <http://www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Getting-Your-Family-Prepared-for-a-Disaster.aspx>

Federal Emergency Response Agency. Helping Children Cope with Disaster <http://www.fema.gov/news-release/2005/10/14/helping-children-cope-disaster>

### B. Assisting Families

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#### Tip Sheet for Parents and Other Family Members Caring for Children

##### Children's Responses to Crisis and Tragic Events continued

- Re-creating the event, without prompting by staff or mental health consultant
  - Playing out or drawing the event
- Overreacting to minor bumps or falls
- Over- or under-reacting to physical contact, sudden movements, or loud sounds such as sirens and slamming doors
- Anxiety and worry
- New fears and/or fears about safety
- Asking questions and making statements about the event

#### What you might see (in addition to those listed above) in your older children

- Strong angry or sad feelings
- Acting out in school
- Poor grades
- Fighting with friends
- Wanting to be alone
- Behaving as if he or she has no feelings
- Disobeying, talking back, or getting into fights
- Drinking or using drugs, hanging out in groups and getting into trouble

Additional information about children's responses to trauma and disasters is available from the following resources:

- American Academy of Pediatrics Promoting Adjustment and Helping Children Cope <http://www.aap.org/disasters/adjustment>
- The Youngest Victims: Disaster Preparedness to Meet Children's Needs <http://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/Children-and-Disasters/Documents/Youngest-Victims-Final.pdf>
- Office of the Administration for Children & Families Early Childhood Disaster-Related Resources <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohsepr/early-childhood>
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network <http://www.nctsn.org>

If you see changes in your child, tell your child's teacher or home visitor. It is important that you and your child get support. Your Head Start/ Early Head Start teacher and/or mental health consultant can help you find resources that can help.

B. Assisting Families

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## Tip Sheet: For Parents and Other Family Members Caring For Children

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

Children 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, parents 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 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. This is done by holding your baby, and comforting your child when he or she has a nightmare.

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

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

American Academy of Pediatrics healthychildren.org. <https://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/children-and-disasters/Documents/Responding-to-Childrens-Emotional-Needs.pdf>

American Academy of Pediatrics. Promoting Adjustment and Helping Children Cope. <http://www.aap.org/disasters/adjustment>

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

<sup>2</sup>For more information, see “Promoting adjustment and helping children cope”

### B. Assisting Families

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#### Tip Sheet: For Parents and Other Family Members Caring For Children Helping Your Child Cope After a Disaster continued

**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 on 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.

**B. Assisting Families**

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## Sample Letter: For Families Affected by a Crisis or Tragic Event<sup>1</sup>

Dear *[insert]*:

The *[insert event/crisis]* has touched many people's lives. You and your family may feel stress from the effects of this crisis on your health, work, or peace of mind. Stress may show up in ways that may not seem to have anything to do with what has recently happened. You or your children may not know how to talk about feelings of anxiety and fears.

There are a number of things you can do to take care of yourself and your children:

- Promote your own physical and emotional healing by healthy eating, rest, exercise, relaxation, meditation, and self-reflection and do the same for your children
- Try to keep a normal daily routine
- Limit demanding responsibilities
- Spend time with family and friends
- Find someone you trust to help with your personal concerns (See the information at the end of this letter.)
- Limit television and other media viewing about the disaster or crisis
- Encourage children to ask questions

Signs that you may be feeling stress include:

- Denial about what is going on
- Irritability leading to moodiness and triggering negative responses and reactions
- Anxiety about facing another day
- Anxiety about what the future holds
- Sleeplessness
- Familiar tasks may seem hard to do because of an inability to concentrate
- Anger at not being able to find a solution
- Anger at not being able to change the events
- Withdrawal from friends or co-workers
- Exhaustion that makes it almost impossible to get things done

Signs that infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in your home may be feeling stress include:

- Problems sleeping (not wanting to go to bed, not wanting to sleep alone, having a hard time at naptime or bedtime, repeatedly waking up, nightmares)
- Crying or complaining whenever you leave and not wanting to be away from you
- Eating problems or changes such as eating too much or not eating
- Playing in violent ways

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from a sample take home letter for parents with children of any age from the National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention.

### B. Assisting Families

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#### Sample Letter: For Families Affected by a Crisis or Tragic Event continued

- Separation anxiety, including clinginess toward teachers, caregivers, or yourself, not wanting to go to school
- Regression, or going back to an earlier stage of development (bedwetting or other toileting issues, baby talk, desiring to be carried or rocked, not being able to do things she/he used to do, social regression)
- Lack of developmental progress or not growing and learning like other children their age
- Re-creating the event (playing out or drawing the event, repeatedly talking about it)
- Increased complaints (headaches, stomachaches)
- Overreacting to minor bumps or falls
- Changes in behavior (not wanting to eat, angry outbursts, decreased attention, withdrawal)

Signs of stress that you may see in your older children, may include (in addition to those above):

- Not paying attention, being restless
- Moody, depressed, or irritable
- Getting lower grades or skipping school
- Disobeying, talking back, or getting into fights
- Drinking or using drugs, hanging out in groups, and getting into trouble

Some of these behaviors may be normal signs of growing, but big changes in these behaviors can be signs of stress. Even when you see changes, you may not know what to do or how to cope with them. We can get help to support you.

If you are feeling very anxious or angry or are struggling, the following resources are available to assist you:

*[Insert contact information for your families if they want to get support—mental health consultants, health professionals, etc.]*

The *[Head Start Program]* is here to support you and your family during this difficult time. Please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

*[Insert name]*

**B. Assisting Families**

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## **Sample Letter: Reassuring Parents that Emergency Plans are in Place After a Crisis or Tragic Event**

Dear Parents and Caregivers:

In light of the tragedy in *[insert town]*, we want you to know that our program has safety plans in place. If you have any questions about these plans, let us know.

This is a good time to make sure that we have your current emergency contact information. If anything has changed, let us know. We will update our records. This information helps us make sure your child is safe.

If you want to know how to provide support or receive help in coping with tragic events such as this, let us know.

Our hearts go out to the families affected by this terrible event.

Sincerely,

*[Insert name]*

Attach handouts

# Resources

## **Administration for Children and Families Early Childhood Disaster Resources**

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohsepr/early-childhood>

## **American Academy of Pediatrics Children & Disasters**

Disaster preparedness to meet children's needs:

<http://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/Children-and-Disasters/Pages/default.aspx>

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>

Promoting Adjustment and Helping Children Cope

<http://www.aap.org/disasters/adjustment>

<http://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/Children-and-Disasters/Pages/Talking-to-Children-About-Disasters.aspx#sthash.UF4GsoOi.dpuf>

[healthychildren.org](http://healthychildren.org)

This website includes a section on talking to children about tragedies and other news events along with other information on safety, prevention, and health issues.

What to Tell your Children About Disasters.

<http://www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Getting-Your-Family-Prepared-for-a-Disaster.aspx>

Talking to Children about Tragedies and Other News Events

<http://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Talking-To-Children-About-Tragedies-and-Other-News-Events.aspx>

Responding to Children's Emotional Needs During Times of Crisis

<http://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Pages/Responding-to-Childrens-Emotional-Needs-During-Times-of-Crisis.aspx>

## **American Red Cross**

American Red Cross

<http://www.redcross.org/>

## **Bright Horizons**

Jim Greenman—What Happened to My World? Helping Children Cope with Natural Disaster and Catastrophe

<http://www.brighthorizons.com/talking-to-children>

## **Caring for our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards; Guidelines for Early Care and Education Programs. 3rd edition**

Provides additional information regarding disaster planning, training, and communication

<http://www.cfoc.nrckids.org/>

## **Federal Emergency Response Agency (FEMA)**

Are You Ready? An In-depth Guide to Citizen Preparedness.

<https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/7877>

### Resources

Recovering from Disaster

[http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/pfa/english/1-psyfirstaid\\_final\\_complete\\_manual.pdf](http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/pfa/english/1-psyfirstaid_final_complete_manual.pdf)

Helping Children Cope with Disaster

<http://www.fema.gov/news-release/2005/10/14/helping-children-cope-disaster>

#### **National Association of School Psychologists**

Helping Children Cope with Crisis: Care for Caregivers

[http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis\\_safety/care-for-caregivers.aspx](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/care-for-caregivers.aspx)

#### **National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention**

Sample Take Home Letter to Parents with Children of Any Age

<http://crisisresponse.promoteprevent.org/ossresource/sample-take-home-letter-parents-children-any-age>

#### **The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)**

After the Hurricane: Helping Young Children Heal

[http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/edu\\_materials/Helping\\_Young\\_Children\\_Heal.pdf](http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/edu_materials/Helping_Young_Children_Heal.pdf)

[http://nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/Helping\\_Young\\_Children\\_Heal.pdf](http://nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/Helping_Young_Children_Heal.pdf)

Resources for Parents and Caregivers

<http://www.nctsn.org/resources/audiences/parents-caregivers>

National Child Traumatic Stress Network and National Center for PTSD

*Psychological First Aid Field Operations Guide*. 2nd ed.

[http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/pfa/english/1-psyfirstaid\\_final\\_complete\\_manual.pdf](http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/pfa/english/1-psyfirstaid_final_complete_manual.pdf)

NCTSN Schools Committee

*Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators*. Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress, October 2008

[http://rems.ed.gov/docs/NCTSN\\_ChildTraumaToolkitForEducators.pdf](http://rems.ed.gov/docs/NCTSN_ChildTraumaToolkitForEducators.pdf)

Parent Guidelines for Helping Children after Hurricanes

[http://nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/parents\\_guidelines\\_talk\\_children\\_hurricanes.pdf](http://nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/parents_guidelines_talk_children_hurricanes.pdf)

Spanish:

[http://nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/ParentGuidelines\\_SpanishVersion.pdf](http://nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/ParentGuidelines_SpanishVersion.pdf)

Parent Tips for Helping Infants and Toddlers after Disasters

[http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/pfa/english/appendix\\_e4\\_tips\\_for\\_parents\\_with\\_infants\\_and\\_toddlers.pdf](http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/pfa/english/appendix_e4_tips_for_parents_with_infants_and_toddlers.pdf)

Parent Tips for Helping Preschool-Age Children after Disasters

[http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/appendix\\_tips\\_for\\_parents\\_with\\_preschool\\_children.pdf](http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/appendix_tips_for_parents_with_preschool_children.pdf)

Parent Tips for Helping School-Age Children after Disasters

[http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/appendix\\_tips\\_for\\_parents\\_with\\_schoolage\\_children.pdf](http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/appendix_tips_for_parents_with_schoolage_children.pdf)

Psychological First Aid for Adults: Tips for Adults

[http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/pfa/english/appendix\\_e8\\_tips\\_for\\_adults.pdf](http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/pfa/english/appendix_e8_tips_for_adults.pdf)

### Resources

Teacher Guidelines for Helping Children after Hurricanes

[http://nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/teachers\\_guidelines\\_talk\\_children\\_hurricanes.pdf](http://nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/teachers_guidelines_talk_children_hurricanes.pdf)

Trinka and Sam: The Rainy Windy Day

[http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/trinka\\_and\\_sam\\_final.pdf](http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/trinka_and_sam_final.pdf)

Spanish:

<http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/trinka-y-juan-final-2-11.pdf>

Symptoms and Behaviors Associated with Exposure to Trauma

<http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/early-childhood-trauma/Symptoms-and-Behaviors-Associated-with-Exposure-to-Trauma>

#### **Office of Head Start Emergency Preparedness website**

Provides additional information, resources, and tip sheet as well as a link to the *Head Start Emergency Preparedness Manual*

<http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/health/ep>

#### **U.S. Army and Youth Services**

Installation Mobilization and Contingency (MAC) Plan Handbook

[https://www.cnrc.n9portal.com/elibrary/navyelib/files/pubs/CYP%20Mobilization%20and%20Contingency%20\(MAC\)%20Handbook.pdf](https://www.cnrc.n9portal.com/elibrary/navyelib/files/pubs/CYP%20Mobilization%20and%20Contingency%20(MAC)%20Handbook.pdf)

#### **Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center**

Helping Youth and Children Recover from Traumatic Events

<http://rems.ed.gov/docs/repository/00000357.pdf>

#### **Ready.gov**

Download family emergency plans, emergency supply checks lists and other resources

[www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov)

#### **Sesame Street**

Here for Each Other: A resource for Parents and Caregivers

[http://www.sesamestreet.org/cms\\_services/services?action=download&fileName=For%20Parents:%20Here%20for%20Each%20Other&uid=88b10d16-be94-4962-bd02-f3fcefbab5c4](http://www.sesamestreet.org/cms_services/services?action=download&fileName=For%20Parents:%20Here%20for%20Each%20Other&uid=88b10d16-be94-4962-bd02-f3fcefbab5c4)

#### **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration**

Tips for Survivors of a Traumatic Event: What to Expect in Your Personal, Family, Work and Financial Life

<http://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content//NMH02-0139/NMH02-0139.pdf>

#### **U.S. Department of Education**

Resources for parents following traumatic events; includes parent tip sheets for helping infants, toddlers and preschool age children after disasters.

<http://www.ed.gov/blog/2012/12/resources-for-parents-following-traumatic-events/>

#### **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Public Health Emergency website**

Provides information and resources, including tips for talking to children and adults about tragic events. A link to the disaster distress helpline is also provided.

<http://www.phe.gov/emergency/events/newtown/Pages/default.aspx>