

Children & Disaster

Children's reactions to disaster and trauma may seem very different from those of the adults around them. As a religious leader, you can guide families to resources for helping their children cope. Like adults, children need to make sense of things that happen; their families can help them to understand, and to reestablish trust, hope, and a sense of security.

TIP SHEET

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Children (0-18) have their own ways of dealing with trauma, according to their age and stage of development. Their reactions are difficult to predict and/or may not show up for some time. Parents/Families and religious leaders are not always sure of the best way to help. This tip sheet outlines the common reactions of children who experience disasters and traumatic events, or hear about them happening to family or friends, and suggests ways religious leaders can support children and their caregivers.

THE FAMILY

The family is the most important part of a child's life. Parent(s), grandparent(s), foster families and other caregivers impart a sense of security and confidence to children. These adults are critical role models and are vital to helping build a child's resilience. How a disaster will impact a child depends to a large extent on how their caregivers react to it. Often, this is more important than what happens to the children themselves. Adults can help by sorting out their own reactions and feelings. Children's reactions can seem out of keeping with their experiences; they may be reacting to family members' distress.

Children (even infants and toddlers) typically know much more than adults give them credit for. They are aware of many things they cannot put into words. Children think about things a great deal even when they are not talking about them, but they can only put them in perspective with adults' help.

Children need to make sense of things that happen. Younger children often don't have all the facts, and their thinking is not yet mature, so they use imagination to fill in the gaps. Teenagers may have a more mature understanding of events, but they also lack the ability to process traumatic events without family and peer support systems. Children of all ages often have misunderstandings about disaster experiences, which they may keep to themselves, especially if the experiences are frightening. What children imagine is often more frightening than what really happened. Or, they find it difficult to reestablish trust, a sense of security and hope.

COMMON REACTIONS OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH TO TRAUMATIC EVENTS

- **Birth through 2 years:** Infants and toddlers do not have the words to describe the events or their feelings. However, they can retain memories of particular sights, sounds, or smells. Infants may react to trauma by being irritable, crying more than usual, or wanting to be held and cuddled. The biggest influence on children of this age is how their parents cope. As children get older, their play may involve acting out elements of the traumatic event that occurred several years in the past and was seemingly forgotten.
- **Preschool - 3 through 6 years:** Preschool children often feel helpless and powerless in the face of an overwhelming event. Because of their age and small size, they lack the ability to protect themselves or others. As a result, they feel intense fear and insecurity about being separated from caregivers. Preschoolers cannot grasp the concept of permanent loss. They can see consequences as being reversible or impermanent. In the weeks following a traumatic event, preschoolers' play activities may reenact the incident or the disaster over and over again.
- **School age - 7 through 10 years:** The school-age child has the ability to understand the permanence of loss. Some children become intensely preoccupied with the details of a traumatic event and want to talk about it continually. This preoccupation can interfere with the child's concentration at school, and academic performance may decline. At school, children may hear inaccurate information from peers. They may display a wide range of reactions—sadness, generalized fear, or specific fears of the disaster happening again, guilt over action or inaction during the disaster, anger that the event was not prevented, or fantasies of playing rescuer.
- **Pre-adolescence to adolescence - 11 through 18 years:** As children grow older, they develop a more sophisticated understanding of disaster events. Their responses are more similar to adults' responses. Teenagers may become involved in dangerous, risk-taking behaviors, such as reckless driving, or alcohol or drug use. Others can become fearful of leaving home and avoid previous levels of activities. Much of adolescence is focused on moving out into the world. After a trauma, the view of the world can seem more dangerous and unsafe. A teenager may feel overwhelmed by intense emotions and yet feel unable to discuss them with others. Teenagers may feel more comfortable seeking peer support than that of family or religious leaders.

MEETING THE EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Children’s reactions are influenced by the behavior, thoughts, and feelings of adults. Religious leaders and youth workers should recommend that parents and caregivers encourage their children to share their thoughts and feelings about the disaster. Clarify misunderstandings about risk and danger by listening to their concerns and answering questions. Caregivers should maintain a sense of calm by validating children’s concerns and perceptions and discuss concrete plans for safety.

Religious leaders and parents/caregivers should listen to what a child is saying. If a young child is asking questions about the event, answer them simply without the elaboration needed for an older child or adult. Some children are comforted by knowing more or less information than others; decide what level of information a particular child needs. If a young child has difficulty expressing feelings, invite the child to draw a picture or tell a story of what happened. Teenagers should be encouraged to speak candidly. Note: Adolescent youth are intuitive and have a low tolerance for adults withholding information from them.

Try to understand what is causing anxieties and fears. Be aware that following a disaster, children are most afraid that:

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

REASSURING CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFTER A DISASTER

Suggestions to help families/caregivers to reassure children/youth include the following:

- Hug and touch children/youth, in an age-appropriate manner. Personal contact is reassuring.
- Calmly provide factual information about the disaster and current plans for ensuring their safety along with recovery plans.
- Encourage them to talk about their feelings.
- Spend extra time with them, such as at bedtime or mealtime.
- Re-establish daily routines for work, school, play, meals, and rest—as well as worship and prayer life.
- Give children specific chores to help them feel they are helping to restore family and community life; teenagers may find it helpful to volunteer in age/skill-appropriate relief and recovery efforts.
- Praise and recognize responsible behavior and the willingness to discuss disaster experiences.
- Model sharing feelings, but be careful not to “over-share” adult information.
- Understand that children/youth will have a range of reactions to disasters; most are “normal” reactions to abnormal events.
- Encourage children/youth to help update their family’s disaster plan.

Families and congregations can create a reassuring environment by following the steps above, as appropriate. However, if any child continues to exhibit stress, if the reactions worsen over time, or if they cause interference with daily behavior at school, at home, or with other relationships, it may be appropriate to talk to a mental health professional. Parents/Caregivers can get professional help from a child’s primary care physician or a mental health provider specializing in children’s needs, or from you, their religious leader. Many communities will also have disaster mental health services for referral. (*Refer to the NDIN Tip Sheet “Faith Communities & the Disaster Distress Helpline” - (1-800-985-5990) and SMS (text “TalkWithUs” to 66746).*)

USE SUPPORT NETWORKS

Religious leaders can offer guidance to parents/caregivers on how to help their children by taking steps to understand and manage their own feelings and ways of coping. They can do this by building and using social support systems of family, faith community, friends, community organizations, or other resources that work for that family. Religious leaders can help parents/caregivers build their own unique social support systems so that in an emergency situation or when a disaster strikes, they can be supported and helped to manage their reactions. As a result, parents/caregivers will be more available to their children and better able to support them. They are almost always the best source of support for children in difficult times. But to support their children, they must attend to their own needs and have a plan for their own support. As a religious leader, ensure that you are fostering a supportive network for parents and children to cope with their disaster-induced stress.

Preparing for disaster helps everyone in the family accept the fact that disasters do happen, and provides an opportunity to identify and collect the resources needed to meet basic needs after disaster. Preparation helps; when adults feel prepared, they cope better and so do children. Religious leaders and faith communities are primary resources to help families prepare.

OTHER RESOURCES

- **American Academy of Pediatrics**—<http://www2.aap.org/disasters/index.cfm>
- **Church of the Brethren: Children’s Disaster Service**—<http://www.brethren.org/cds/>
- **Department of Human Services: Victoria Australia**—
http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/69649/fact17.pdf
- **FEMA: Helping Children Cope With Disaster**— http://www.fema.gov/rebuild/recover/cope_child.shtm
- **SAMSHA**—http://www.samhsa.gov/.../Tips_Talking_to_Children_After_Disaster.pdf
- **United Methodists in Disaster Response**— <http://new.gbqm-umc.org/umcor/media/scdr/childreact.pdf>