



Parent Tips – *Helping children during and after disasters*

Child Haven’s Clinical Director, Michael Abrams and Clinical Psychologist, Dr. Larry Miller suggest to parents:

- 1) Take breaks from watching TV and social media when possible so as not to get overwhelmed. Use that time to address your child(ren)’s fears through questions and play. Often the children will let the parent know what they can handle based on the questions they ask. Sometimes giving more information than a child requests can be overwhelming for them. Parents should try to manage their own worry when speaking with their children.
- 2) It is good to try to engage children in games and projects that can bring family together and temporarily divert attention away from the fires.
- 3) If, in the case of evacuation, parents should support their children by staying close and remembering to pack important comforts such as a favorite stuffed animal, toy, blankets, etc.

Warning Signs

Children react in different ways to disasters. Some react right away and others react weeks or months later. How they react depends on their age, risk factors and personality or temperament. Watch for warning signs like these:

- Staying very close to parents at all times (“clinging”)
- Fear of being apart from parents
- Fears that do not go away
- Sleep problems like nightmares and bedwetting
- Refusal to go to school
- Acting out at home or school
- Being irritable or jumpy
- Trouble paying attention or concentrating
- Headaches, stomachaches or other physical problems
- Pulling into themselves, not doing normal activities
- Feeling very sad or low energy
- Thinking about the disaster all the time

Pre-School age

Young children often mix up real and pretend. They might not know quite what happened in the disaster, but they will know that people around them are upset or sad. When preschool children see the news on TV, they may not know that the news often shows the same event again and again. They may think the scary event keeps taking place. Pre- Schoolers shouldn't be watching media. Explain what is happening in a developmentally appropriate way.

Letting children know that the fires are being handled/managed by fire fighters who are making sure all the people are safe and are slowly putting out the fires. While they are putting out the fires there is a lot of smoke in the air which is why it's important to listen to parents and stay inside. It is OK to tell them that this is scary but all our friends and neighbors are working hard together to make sure that everyone is getting help and staying safe.

When disaster or trauma directly affects children this age, they will need help adjusting to loss, change, and fears. Young children rely on parents, family and teachers to help them through tough times. They may regress and start to suck their thumb again, or wet the bed. Problems with eating, sleeping, and complaints of pain are also common. They may be scared of monsters, strangers or the dark. They may also act out or pull into themselves. Sometimes they want to talk about the event a lot and even add parts that did not really happen.

School age

School age children are more able to understand what is happening but still might easily be overwhelmed especially if there is a history of trauma. These children can understand more about the disaster than preschool children can. They may want to hear about what happened from trusted adults and receive comfort. Children this age can feel personally affected by news stories. When the disaster affects them directly, they may have many of the same responses as preschool children. They may also pull into themselves, refuse to go to school, do poorly in school, act out, or have trouble paying attention.

Like with the Pre-School age, letting children know that the fires are being handled/managed by fire fighters who are making sure all the people are safe and are working hard putting out the fires. Talk to them about the smoke in the air which is why it's important to listen to parents and stay inside. It is OK to tell them that this is scary but assure them all our community is working hard together to make sure everyone is getting help and staying safe.

Teens

Teens aged 12-17 will understand the event much better than younger kids. They may want to share their feelings and thoughts about issues raised by the disaster. When the disaster affects teens directly, they may react to the stress with aches and pains, pulling into themselves, acting out at school or home, seeking attention, or taking up risky behavior like using drugs or alcohol. Teens are concerned about what their friends think, and may act less engaged in the family. But they still count on their family's love and support being there when they need it. Older teens may want to take action and get involved in helping. Please help them use their social media in constructive ways and being mindful of the exposure on the media which is often unsupervised.

How Parent can help their children:

Children's questions

- ✓ Answer questions at a level the child can understand.
- ✓ Answer questions honestly, but don't dwell on details.
- ✓ Do not be afraid to admit that you cannot answer all of their questions.
- ✓ Don't give more information than your child asks for.
- ✓ Don't force discussion on children; instead, follow their lead.
- ✓ Be available. Provide ongoing chances for children to talk. They probably will have more questions as time goes on.

❑ *Dealing with feelings*

- ✓ Teach kids that all emotions are okay. A range of feelings is normal. Feelings can be very strong.
- ✓ Help your children voice their feelings, and pay attention to what they say.
- ✓ Allow children to discuss other fears and concerns about unrelated issues. This is a good chance to explore these issues also.
- ✓ Give lots of physical reassurance like hugs and cuddles.
- ✓ Keep your family routine.
- ✓ Be careful not to focus on blame for the disaster.
- ✓ Explain that the chance of a disaster happening to your child is very small.

❑ *Handling TV news*

- ✓ Watch the news with your children. That gives a chance to see your kids' reaction and make sure they understand well.
- ✓ Provide children with chances to talk about what they see on TV and to ask questions.
- ✓ Don't let kids watch the news footage over and over. It can make them more stressed and fearful, or dull their feelings about the event.
- ✓ Don't assume that just because you don't have the news on at home your child has not heard about or seen the news elsewhere. Make sure they are not keeping fearful feelings to themselves.

❑ *Take care of yourself*

- ✓ Be aware of your own feelings.
- ✓ If you are having trouble coping, find support.

❑ *Find the positive and take action*

- ✓ Help children find the good things within the tragedy. For example, when people help each other, take heroic action, and donate medicine and food to survivors.
- ✓ Show your children how the world organizes to work together. For example, through the International Red Cross or the United Nations Relief Fund.
- ✓ Teach children about the science used to predict, stop and deal with natural disasters.
- ✓ Make a family emergency plan, so your kids know your family is ready, and they know what to do.
- ✓ Help your child find ways to show their care for survivors of disaster, especially other children.

Risk Factors

Some kids are at higher risk for problems in coping with disaster. Children at risk may:

- Have reacted strongly in the past to disasters.
- Live in or have relatives in places that have had natural disasters.
- Have had stressful events in their family, like divorce, serious illness, or death of a family member or friend.
- Have an emotional or learning problem.

To help these kids, reassure them. Explain what your family and local and government officials are doing to make sure they are safe. Watch for signs that they are not coping well.

If you are concerned about your child, ask us at Child Haven or your health care provider for advice or a referral to someone who can help. Sometimes counseling for the whole family is a good idea. Parents need to know that they, too, can suffer from trauma after a disaster.