



Supporting Children Through Natural Disasters

Navigating the aftermath of a hurricane can be a daunting task for both parents and children. Some families may be displaced from their homes, have experienced loss, and/or experienced a threat to their safety and security.

As a parent, it is important to differentiate between normal and abnormal stress responses that children might display and to provide the necessary support to the wide variety of feelings and behavior your children may experience in the days, weeks, and months following a natural disaster. By understanding age-appropriate reactions, signs of distress, and implementing supportive strategies, you can help your child cope with their feelings and regain a sense of security. Remember, it is important to be patient and compassionate as they process the stressful event they experienced.

During and after a stressful event, it is important to look out for signs that a child is experiencing traumatic distress while also keeping in mind your child's developmental age. These are all common stress responses:

Young children:

- Increased clinginess or an increased need for reassurance from caregivers during and after a stressful event.
- Experience nightmares or disruptions in sleep and appetite.
- Minor regressions in developmental behaviors such as potty training.
- Emotional distress in the forms of: excessive crying, increased tantrums, difficulty separating from parents, and changes in irritability may occur.

School-aged children:

- Heightened anxiety and worry, trouble concentrating or completing schoolwork, or irritability and mood swings.
- Frequent questions about the event, withdrawal from friends or activities they once enjoyed, or physical complaints like headaches or stomachaches without a medical cause.

Teenagers:

- Exhibit anger, frustration, or withdrawal from friends and family.
- Decline in academic performance, substance use, or expression of hopelessness and despair.

For any age group, as things are slowly getting back to normal, if these symptoms persist for longer than 90 days, or impact your child's ability to function at home or school, it is important to seek professional mental health support.

As caregivers, remember that our children are constantly listening to and watching us. They listen to the conversations we have with other adults around us, the news reports we watch on TV, and what we say and do before, during, and in the aftermath of a natural disaster. They watch as we experience our own fears and distress. There are many ways that we can support the emotional health and well-being of our children after a natural disaster like a hurricane:

- Encourage open communication through sharing thoughts and feelings about the hurricane.
- Validate your child's feelings and let them know that it is okay to be upset or scared.
- Use age-appropriate language and listen without judgment.
- Provide honest, clear, and age-appropriate information about the event. Provide reassurance when you can.
- During and after a stressful event, restore a sense of safety in whatever ways possible. For children, maintaining their daily routines can help regain a sense of normalcy and stability.
- Be mindful of the media that your child is consuming, as continuous exposure to images and videos can increase anxiety and distress.
- Promote healthy coping strategies like deep breathing, drawing, or engaging in physical activity together as a family. Remember, children learn from what they see, so be sure that you are also practicing your coping skills to not only model for your children, but to manage the stress and anxiety you might be feeling as well.