

Helping Children After a Disaster

EM 8873-E • August 2004

During and after a disaster, it is important to support children and allay their fears. If fears are not addressed carefully, they may continue long after the disaster has passed.

Young children are particularly at risk during these times because of their vulnerability, their lack of understanding, and their difficulty in communicating their feelings. Older children may be frightened of how the disaster might affect their future.

Parents and other adults can make a great difference in how children deal with stress. Love and support can carry children over the rough spot. It helps to understand some normal reactions that children may have to disaster.

Fear is a normal reaction

With disasters, come uncertainty and a disruption of daily routine. For children, fear is a normal reaction to such an event. Fears vary depending on a child's age, maturity, and previous experiences. Four common fears are death, darkness, animals, and abandonment.

It's important that parents understand that they are not spoiling their children by responding to their fears. Responsiveness can help children through the stressful time following a disaster. Reassurance, extra comfort, and physical and emotional support from the person who makes them feel safe and secure help children after a disaster or emergency.

How can a parent help?

- **Talk.** Provide simple, accurate information to a child's questions in a way she understands.
- **Listen.** Encourage a child to talk. Is there fear, anxiety, or insecurity in her voice, words, or facial expression?
- **Acknowledge feelings.** Let a child know that his feelings are okay.
- **Stay together.** A child needs reassurance she is cared for, will be taken care of, and will not be abandoned.
- **Involve children.** Let them help in appropriate ways, such as with simple clean-up activities or filling sandbags. Such assistance helps them feel needed, appreciated, and useful.
- **Spend extra time together at bedtime.** This is a time to talk and offer assurance. A nightlight might help him feel more secure.
- **Take time to play.** Play can relieve tension. It also provides an opportunity to listen to what a child says and watch how she plays. After a disaster, feelings frequently are expressed while playing with dolls, toys, and friends.
- **Keep a sense of humor.** Find something to laugh about every day.

Children will reflect the anxieties of their parents. When parents take care of their own emotions and stress, it is much easier on children.

Adapted for use in Oregon from University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension, Kansas State University Cooperative Extension Service, University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service, North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, and University of Florida Cooperative Extension Service materials.

Extension resources

The OSU Extension Service has materials on related topics. To locate the local office of the OSU Extension Service, go to “County Government” in your telephone book.

Publications and videos are available for viewing on the OSU Extension website (extension.oregonstate.edu, then “Publications”).

EC 1291-E, *Helping Children Grow: Listening to Your Children*

EC 1312-E, *Helping Children Grow: Handling Children’s Fears*

EC 1403-E, *Managing Between Jobs: Helping Children Cope*

Other Extension Service materials

The Disaster Handbook, 1998 National Edition, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida Cooperative Extension Service.

Disaster Guide, University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service.

Triumph Over Tragedy: A Community Response to Managing Trauma in Times of Disaster and Terrorism (www.nrbhc.org), National Rural Behavioral Health Center.

Other resources

American Red Cross. The alphabetical listing in local phone books will point you to a local chapter of the American Red Cross. The agency’s website includes information and materials in English and Spanish (www.redcross.org).

Emergency Management. The “County Government” section in local phone books lists each county’s emergency management unit. Listings vary by county (look under Sheriff or Health departments, Emergency Management services, Civil Defense, Public Works, or related units).

Extension Disaster Education Network

(EDEN). This website provides a list of resources developed in other states about floods; drought; snow, ice, and wind damage; animal emergencies; and general disaster (www.agctr.lsu.edu/eden, then “Extension websites” and “Other on-line sources”).

Emergency Animal Rescue Service (EARS).

This site provides tips for animal owners and links to emergency shopping lists for owners of dogs, cats, birds, horses, reptiles, and amphibians (www.uan.org/ears/index.html).

Federal Emergency Management Agency

(FEMA). The online library offers publications and videos in English and Spanish and includes materials specifically developed for children (www.fema.gov).

Oregon Emergency Management (OEM).

Affiliated with the Oregon State Police, the OEM website offers emergency-related information on earthquakes and tsunamis, and provides disaster recovery resources (www.osp.state.or.us/oem).

Social Security Online.

The official site of the Social Security Administration, this site links to hundreds of publications in 21 languages and provides information on survivor benefits and programs (www.ssa.gov).