

Disasters: Ongoing Response

This summary is part of Children's efforts to aid families and providers in coping with the current events in our country and world.

The effects of any trauma, such as the events of September 11, 2001, or war, can cause physiological stress for people of all ages. For parents and caregivers, it is especially important to be aware of the stress your child may be experiencing after a frightening or distressing event. It is important to attend to children's needs for two reasons: delayed post-traumatic stress response and secondary fallout.

Delayed post-traumatic stress response

Some children will have dealt well with the event or trauma due to support from parents, school, places of worship and other groups. Others will rely on their own survival skills, including denial.

Even if your child does well during the acute phase of an event, he may have a delayed stress response weeks after the trauma. This was the pattern after the earthquake in Northwest Washington in 2001. Children who developed symptoms did not do so right away, but two to four weeks after the quake.

When an event becomes more distant and people get back to their routine lives, children are often left to their own resources. They may have intrusive thoughts of the scenes they saw on TV, recall their parents' anxiety and start to think about their own vulnerability.



Children's most common fears over the past 40 years have been fears of danger and death. The current events in our country and world could serve to activate these fears. Thus, parents should watch for signs of anxiety in their children, such as not wanting to:

- Be away from their parents
- Go to school
- Leave the house
- Go to sleep at night

Your child may become cranky, sad or aggressive during the day, or have nightmares.

Some children may show increased violence in their play, with themes related to recent events, such as war play, crashing planes into buildings over and over, making buildings fall down, or having "evil people" attack "good people."

These symptoms could show a delayed post-traumatic stress response. Some children can be reassured by talking over their concerns with their parents. Others may need professional help.

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Secondary fallout

The other reason for staying alert to children's needs is the secondary effects of any trauma. There could be a change in the economic and social conditions of our country. Many parents will talk about their concerns about money, be fearful of job loss or know someone who will lose a job. Others will question their life values or be called up for military service. Children will overhear some of these discussions. Although they may not express their concerns, they may become anxious about family matters about which they have seemed unconcerned in the past. Parents' concerns and fears may "infect" their children. Again, talking over their concerns with a parent will help some children. Others will need professional help.

When to seek professional help:

- When you see a consistent and persistent change in your child's behavior and mood.
- If your child's grades or behavior in school change in a negative way.
- If your child no longer is able to enjoy doing things she doing in the past, such as playing with friends.
- If your child has increasing angry or tearful outbursts that are not showing signs of diminishing on their own.

These may be a sign of increasing depression or anxiety.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Children's Resource Line: (206) 987-2500 or (866) 987-2500 toll-free Washington, Alaska, Montana, Idaho
- For more resources on coping with war and disasters, go to www.seattlechildrens.org/disasterinfo.htm
- Your Child's Health Care Provider

Children's will make this information available in alternate formats upon request. Please call Marketing Communications at (206) 987-5205.

This handout has been reviewed by clinical staff at Children's Hospital. However, your child's needs are unique. Before you act or rely upon this information, please talk with your child's health care provider.