

Disasters: Helping Children Cope

As a parent, you can't control natural disasters or events in our world, but you can help your child to cope when disaster strikes. The following tips provide ideas for ways to help make your child feel safe, things to look for in your child and how to be a good role model.

Limit your child's exposure to media coverage.

- Turn off the TV and radio to help protect children from being overwhelmed with the repeated stories and video images of the disaster. Also avoid exposing them to graphic pictures in newspapers and magazines.
- If you choose to have the TV on, watch with your children and talk about what you see. Answer your child's questions.

Help your child feel safe.

Tell your child she is safe, that she is your primary concern and will not be left alone.

Be honest with your child.

- Your child will be aware that something has happened. Before answering questions, ask your child what she knows and wants to know.
- Give simple, honest answers, but put things in perspective. You might say things like, "A few people made some bad decisions to hurt people," "It happened a long way from here," or "Most people are good."



- Listen to your child's feelings and concerns. It is important to be honest about your own fears and anxieties, but keep in mind that children need to know people can have strong feelings and still cope with difficult situations.
- Encourage your child to ask questions at any time.

Be aware of your child's feelings.

- It's OK if your child doesn't want to talk about it with you, but remain aware of changes in mood and how your child acts.
- Coach your child in setting limits with friends or others when talking about events.
- Some children may show what they're thinking through their pictures or their play. This can relieve stress, give you clues to their concerns and open the door for talking about their feelings.
- Each child responds in a unique way. Your child's response may change over time.

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Stick to routines.

As best as you can, keep on with regular activities, meal times and bedtimes. During stressful times, your child especially needs the safety and security that comes with regular routines.

Allow and expect your child to go back to behaviors she may have given up.

These may include being clingy, problems with potty training and thumb sucking (for young children).

Your child may need you to:

- Leave the light on while she sleeps
- Respond quickly to nightmares
- Give extra hugs and reassurances
- Stay close to her as she is falling asleep
- Let her know where you are or will be

Use your family's values to reassure your child.

- Look to faith traditions and spiritual practices for comfort.
- Point out that there are helpers and heroes who are working hard to make this situation better.
- Help your child understand what she can do to not feel helpless, such as raise money for relief efforts.

Take good care of yourself.

- Be aware of your own feelings. Talk with friends, family and colleagues.

- Develop a plan to manage your own feelings; anxious parents have greater difficulty helping their children manage their feelings.

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.