

Helping Children Cope with Disaster

INTRODUCTION:

It is seen that social vulnerability has always been somewhat neglected, while the physical elements like buildings, infrastructure, agriculture has received primary attention. A general methodology to measure social vulnerability is still being developed, focusing on special categories of vulnerable groups; livelihoods at risk; perception of risk; existence of local institutions; and level of poverty. Records of past disaster suggest that the following groups of people are particularly at risk and require special attention:

- Children;
- The senior persons;
- Women, particularly when pregnant and lactating;
- Mentally and physically handicapped people;
- Single parent families;

Here we will discuss about some salient aspects :

Disasters may strike quickly and without warning. These events can be frightening for adults, but they are traumatic for children if they don't know what to do. During a disaster, your family may have to leave your home and daily routine. Children may become anxious, confused or frightened. As an adult, you'll need to cope with the disaster in a way that will help children avoid developing a permanent sense of loss. It is important to give children guidance that will help them reduce their

fears. You should decide what's best for your children, but consider using these suggestions as guidelines.

Children and Their Response to Disaster

Children depend on daily routines: They wake up, eat breakfast, go to school, play with friends. When emergencies or disasters interrupt this routine, children may become anxious.

In a disaster, they'll look to you and other adults for help. How you react to an emergency gives them clues on how to act. If you react with alarm, a child may become more scared. They see our fear as proof that the danger is real. If you seem overcome with a sense of loss, a child may feel their losses more strongly.

Children's fears also may stem from their imagination, and you should take these feelings seriously. A child who feels afraid is afraid. Your words and actions can provide reassurance. When talking with your child, be sure to present a realistic picture that is both honest and manageable.

Feelings of fear are healthy and natural for adults and children. But as an adult, you need to keep control of the situation. When you're sure that danger has passed, concentrate on your child's emotional needs by asking the child what's uppermost in his or her mind. Having children participate in the family's recovery activities will help them feel that their life will return to "normal." Your response during this time may have a lasting impact.

Be aware that after a disaster, children are most afraid that:

- the event will happen again.

- someone will be injured or killed.
- they will be separated from the family.
- they will be left alone.

Advice to Parents: Prepare for Disaster

You can create a **“Family Disaster Plan”** by taking following simple steps.

- First learn what hazards exist in your community and how to prepare for each. Then meet with your family to discuss what you would do, as a group, in each situation.
- Next, take steps to prepare your family for disaster such as: posting emergency phone numbers, selecting an out-of-state family contact, assembling disaster supplies kits for each member of your household. Finally, practice your Family Disaster Plan so everyone will remember what to do when a disaster does occur.
- Develop and practice a **“Family Disaster Plan”**. Contact your local emergency management or civil defense office, or your local Red Cross chapter for materials that describe how your family can create a disaster plan. Everyone in the household, including children, should play a part in the family's response and recovery efforts.
- Teach your child how to recognize danger signals. Make sure your child knows what is the phone number of fire service and local community warning systems sound like (horns, sirens).
- Explain how to call for help. Teach your child how and when to call for help. Check the telephone directory for local emergency phone numbers and post these phone numbers by all telephones.

- Help your child memorize important family information. Children should memorize their family name, address and phone number. They should also know where to meet in case of an emergency. Some children may not be old enough to memorize the information. They could carry a small index card that lists emergency information to give to an adult or babysitter, if available.

Teaching Your Children How to Call for Help

Teach your child how and when to call for help.

Teach them how to check the telephone directory for local emergency numbers.

After the Disaster: Time for Recovery

Immediately after the disaster, try to reduce your child's fear and anxiety.

- Keep the family together. While you look for housing and assistance, you may want to leave your children with relatives or friends. Instead, keep the family together as much as possible and make children a part of what you are doing to get the family back on its feet. Children get anxious, and they'll worry that their parents won't return.
- Calmly and firmly explain the situation. As best as you can, tell children what you know about the disaster. Explain what will happen next. For example, say, "Tonight, we will all stay together in the shelter." Get down to the child's eye level and talk to them.
- Encourage children to talk. Let children talk about the disaster and ask questions as much as they want. Encourage children to describe

what they're feeling. Listen to what they say. If possible, include the entire family in the discussion.

- Include children in recovery activities. Give children chores? that are their responsibility. This will help children feel they are part of the recovery. Having a task will help them understand that everything will be all right.

You can help children cope by understanding what causes their anxieties and fears. Reassure them with firmness and love. Your children will realize that life will eventually return to normal. If a child does not respond to the above suggestions, seek help from a mental health specialist or a member of the clergy.

Physiological Problem: Emotional Effects

The children, mostly between three and twelve years of age, had immediate problem of sleeping and increased dependency on adults. The behavior of the parents reflected their own fear.

Care for the homeless children

The problem faced by the homeless children in case of an emergency, are quite different from that faced by the adults. Special attentions to their feeding, clothing, housing, recreation are essential which should be deal very carefully by trained persons.

- The children separated from the family members, generally weep and cry. Trained volunteers can manage the situation, even sometimes make the children forget their parents.

- With recreation, the children can be kept happy. This will help to keep them away from low moraled people.
- It should be ensured that proper accommodation of food and shelter for the unidentified children is made available. Photograph of such children should be presented in newspapers, television so that any known person can identify them.
- Sometimes some children remain unclaimed. Under such situation, they should be handed over to certain recognised or govt. childcare homes.

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