



National Center for Children Exposed to Violence

Parents' Guide for Helping Children in the Wake of Disaster

The effects of Hurricane Katrina have been felt far beyond the Gulf Coast and have reverberated throughout the nation. These guidelines are offered to help parents address their children's concerns and worries arising from the effects of Hurricane Katrina and similar natural disasters that cause wide spread death, loss, displacement and injury. These guidelines are intended to help caregivers identify and address signs of adjustment difficulties in children, and suggest ways to talk to children about their fears and concerns. These guidelines are not intended for children and families who have been directly impacted by Hurricane Katrina, but for the wider group of children and families throughout the United States.

Important things to remember:

- Your calm ability to listen to your children's concerns is one of the most powerful ways of helping children learn, understand and feel safe and secure in the most important part of their world---their families.
- The first and most important source of help for children comes from parents and other adults who are most centrally involved in their lives. Several principles can help us think about ways we can support our children in the uncertain times that follow natural disasters.
- First, adult caregivers need to be aware of their own reactions. However, if you feel unable to cope, ask another trusted adult to talk with your children and you should get help and support from family, trusted friends, clergy or mental health professionals.

- Recognize that when events threaten safety and security, arousing fears of loss, losing control, bodily damage, and death, no one is immune to feeling afraid, this is especially the case if one has family and friends who have been directly affected by the Hurricane.
- Recognize the difference between your fears and those of your children.
- Remember that the size and scope of the world to children is determined by their phase of development and their immediate life circumstances.
- Younger children are unable to think about issues that do not specifically affect them and, if aware of the recent disaster, may be more likely to think about it in highly personalized ways. For example, they may want to know if *their* house can be flooded or blown down by the wind.
- Older children and adolescents might be more concerned about the violence and chaos that have ensued or about what the government is doing to help people.

When talking with your children, it is important to keep in mind:

- How close to home were the catastrophic events that occur in the world around them?
- Has death, injury or loss of property, occurred to someone they know as a result of this particular catastrophe?
- How much on-going talk and news (TV, radio etc.) about the event is the child exposed to?
- Have children suffered previous major losses, or other traumatic disruptions in their lives that may make them more vulnerable to heightened fearful responses to the current catastrophic events? For example, have they ever been affected by a large-scale disaster or suffered recent major disruptions in their lives?
- If children are already psychologically struggling are there new

symptoms or difficulties that have emerged in the event's aftermath?

Adults can help lessen the impact of television news reports on children. To do this:

- Monitor and limit the amount of TV coverage they watch.
- Remember that the more bad news young preschool and school-age children see and hear, the more worried they will be.
- If your school-age and older children are interested in watching reports about terrifying events, watch with them when you can so you can talk about what they have seen and heard.
- Adolescents and adults who are unable to detach themselves from TV news programs may be trying to deal with anxiety in ways that often make matters worse, not better. Turn off the television long enough to talk with one another about the ideas and concerns that the news arouses.

How do I know if my children have been affected by the disaster that has just occurred?

Even when the news and talk about current events is filled with the news of the catastrophic events, many children, especially young ones, may remain focused on the typical concerns of childhood. Young people who do show concern about these events and how they might affect their lives may have heightened worries about their personal safety, either related specifically to the risk of natural disaster or representing a more general sense of increased anxiety. Signs of distress may include:

- Depressed or irritable mood
- More needy or clingy and difficulty separating
- A resistant and defiant attitude
- Difficulty focusing on tasks or activities
- Difficulties with classmates and peer group
- Social isolation or withdrawal

- Dramatic changes in academic performance
- Physical complaints (e.g. headaches, stomach aches)
- Changes in appetite
- Sleep disturbances
- Toileting problems

Children and adolescents who exhibit these difficulties are not typically aware of these changes and, even when they are, may not recognize what is causing them. Children with continuing distress related to other traumatic events may be particularly affected and may experience a recurrence of some of the feelings associated with a prior loss or tragedy.

What questions are my children likely to have?

- Our children’s questions provide an excellent opportunity to learn what they are thinking and feeling. It is by listening carefully to their queries that we can begin to help them navigate a sometimes-frightening world.
- Often what children need most is someone whom they trust who will listen to their questions, accept their feelings, and be there for them. Don’t worry about knowing exactly the right thing to say – *there is no answer that will make everything okay.*
- If children do express anxiety and concern about news of catastrophic events, they may be most concerned about the safety and stability of their immediate world of family, friends, and other important figures in their lives. Focus on these concerns first.
- Are we safe? If there is no immediate threat to family and friends, say so.
- If there is news of potential threats, remind your children that you will be there to keep them safe and to help them understand these events as they unfold.
- If your children ask you questions about news of horrible events, ask for their ideas first so that you can respond to the specific details of *their* concerns.
- Respond to questions with the factual information that is available to you. Do

not speculate or repeat rumors and resist over-explaining. The degree of detail children want and need to know will depend on their age and the specific nature of their concerns (please see developmental guidelines below).

- While none of us can guarantee absolute and permanent safety in an uncertain world, it is vital for parents and caregivers to act as a buffer between vulnerable and frightened children and a world they can't be expected to fully understand.

What if they don't ask any questions – should I bring it up? What if they don't seem to want to talk about it?

- When upsetting things happen, it is a good idea to be ready to talk with your children. At first, older children may tell you that they don't want to or need to discuss it. It is often easier to begin discussions by asking your children what if anything they have heard about the effects of the hurricane, about their ideas and questions is often the best way of distinguishing between their concerns and our concerns.
- In most cases it is not a good idea to force your children to talk with you, but instead keep the door open for them to come back and discuss the disaster and concerns about it later.

What if this discussion upsets them?

- It is natural that your children may get upset when talking about scary or disturbing things. As a parent, being able to listen to your children's frightening ideas and feelings demonstrates your strength and unshakeable commitment to them. When there are scary things going on in the larger world around them, seeing that parents can still parent may be the most reassuring experience that frightened children can have.
- Make sure your children realize it is okay to show you when they are upset. When they do, you have helped them take the important first steps in tolerating and coping with strong feelings and scary thoughts. If there is no one there for them, children may try to hide their feelings and become overwhelmed as they try to deal with their worries alone.

How do I know if my children need more help than I can provide?

- Frightening events surrounding natural disasters evoke a range of upsetting but “normal” reactions in all of us. If your children continue to seem to be particularly or unusually upset for several days – especially if they seem upset or worried about many things, or if they’re having trouble in school, at home or with their friends – then it is a good idea to speak with someone outside the family for advice. You may wish to begin with your child’s teacher or school counseling services, pediatrician, or a mental health counselor.
- You don’t need to wait until your children show signs of being very troubled. Trust your instincts and seek advice whenever you think it might be helpful.

Additional information that may be of help can be found through the following websites or by contacting the NCCEV directly at (203) 785-7047 or 1-877-49-NCCEV (62238):

National Center for Children Exposed to Violence at the Yale Child Study Center (New Haven, CT) www.nccev.org

National Center for PTSD (White River Junction, VT) www.ncptsd.va.gov

National Traumatic Stress Network www.nctsnet.org

DEVELOPMENTAL GUIDELINES

The impact of events in the world beyond children's immediate world of family, friends, neighborhood and school is always in the context of current life circumstances and where they are at in their development. How they feel, and think; what they are capable of doing; and, the nature of their relationships are key ingredients to how they experience the world around them.

What we worry about and how we worry as adults is often very different from our children's versions of worry.

- What children worry about will vary depending on their age.
- If you listen to your children's questions and observe their behavior, you will have a better idea of what they are concerned about.
- Because children depend on the adults around them for safety and security, it is important for the adults to take care of themselves in order to take care of the children.

Infants

Infants depend totally on the adults who look after them. They sense the emotions of their caregivers and react accordingly. If the adult is calm and confident, the child will feel secure; if on the other hand, the adult is anxious and overwhelmed, the infant will feel unprotected.

When adults are overtly anxious and distressed, infants may react. Infants may respond with fretful fussing, difficulty being soothed, or sleep and eating disturbances, or they may withdraw and seem lethargic and unresponsive.

Adults can help by remaining calm and maintaining ordinary routines of life.

Toddlers

At this age children have begun to interact with a broader physical and social environment. They still depend on the adults that look after them and therefore will respond to the situation depending on how adults react. As with infants, if the adult is calm and confident, the child will feel secure; if on the other hand, the adult is anxious and overwhelmed, the toddler will feel unprotected.

Common reactions include disturbances in eating, sleeping and toileting, increased tantrums, irritability and defiance. They may also become more passive and withdrawn. It is also very common for children to become more clingy.

Adults can help by remaining calm and maintaining ordinary routines of life. At this age, children have access to television. Television can generate anxiety because of the repetitive and graphic images it projects. Exposure should be limited as much as possible.

Preschool Children

At this age, children usually have become part of a social group beyond their family. Their language, play, social, and physical skills are more advanced. Through their play, talk and behavior, they show their ideas of good and bad, their pride in all the things they can do with their bodies and their fears about possible injury.

Common reactions include disturbances in eating and sleeping, bed-wetting, increased tantrums, irritability and defiance. Changes in play and drawings may include more aggression, fighting, or re-enactments of the frightening events. Some children may show their upset through their inability to take part in play and other activities that usually give them pleasure. Children can have difficulties separating from parents or caregivers; they can also make a big fuss about small injuries. Preschoolers may be very preoccupied with questions related to who did it and what will happen to them.

Adults can help by remaining calm and maintaining routines. Caregivers can become aware of the specific worries of individual children by listening to their comments and questions and observing their play and other behavior. Once adults understand children's worries, they can answer questions, correct

misunderstandings and offer reassurance. Exposure to television should be limited. An adult should be present to monitor and protect children from the overwhelming graphic images and to talk about what they are watching.

School-age Children

At this age, children become more independent; they are more able to talk about their thoughts and feelings, play with friends and participate in groups. Ideas of what is fair and just become important and they can cope with difficulties with better skills. School-age children are more involved in learning, sports and recreational activities.

Common reactions at this age include a need to stay close to parents and an inability to participate in ordinary activities. They can become too preoccupied with the events and ideas about revenge and punishment. School-age children can, like younger kids, experience nightmares, find it difficult to go to bed or wake up in the middle of the night. They may also change their eating habits. They can begin to have difficulties at school and can become anxious and aggressive.

Adults can become aware of the specific worries of individual children by listening to their comments and questions, or by observing changes in their play and other behaviors. Attention should be given to answer questions with accurate information in relation to the children's worries. Friends' ideas should be discussed and misinformation corrected. As with younger children, exposure to television news should be limited. An adult should be present to monitor and protect children from the overwhelming graphic images and to talk about what they are watching.

Adolescents

Adolescents can feel out of control due to the many changes that are happening in their bodies. They struggle to become independent of their families and to define themselves. The world of peers and teachers becomes central. It is common for adolescents to have conflicts with parents, teachers and other authority figures. There is a tendency to deny or exaggerate what happens around them and to feel that nothing can harm them.

Common reactions may include a preoccupation with what is happening; they

can feel frightened and out of control and may feel completely helpless or imagine themselves as unrealistically strong and powerful. Adolescents can also become even more judgmental and critical of the adults around them and those dealing with the crisis situation. They may also act in ways that can put themselves and others in danger, such as increased experimentation with alcohol and drugs, reckless driving or other behaviors, which may serve an attempt to avoid feeling vulnerable and small.

Adults can help by using the adolescents' more advanced ability to think and talk to discuss their thoughts, feelings and worries. Some teenagers may feel more comfortable talking in groups with their peers and/or with teachers. Adults should be aware that drastic changes in adolescents' behaviors might indicate distress. Forcing adolescents to talk about their feelings may cause more harm than good; instead, adults should make sure that adolescents have a variety of opportunities to talk to whom they want and when they are ready.

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