



Disaster and Trauma Responses of Children

Children exposed to disasters and/or trauma might respond in various emotional and psychological ways. Displacement from the child's home, community/neighborhood and even worse delayed reunification with parents can add to the child's stress. During this time parents and other supporting adults are very important as they are most familiar with the child and can respond to the child's reaction(s). For pre-adolescents and adolescents, peer support and peer engagement also becomes an important support system.

Children: 1 to 6 years of age

- Startle response to sudden and loud noises
- Stomach aches, headaches, etc.
- Freezing-sudden immobility of the body
- Heightened arousal
- Cognitive confusion
- Bed wetting, loss of age appropriate verbal skills and motor function, and/or other regressive symptoms
- Sleep problems
- Anxiety
- Fear
- Lack of usual responses
- Clinging to caregiver/separation fear
- Crying
- Repeated play of the disaster/trauma event

Children: 7 to 11 years of age

- Behaving like a younger child
- Anger and aggression
- Worrying about safety
- Sleep problems
- Loss of interest of usual activities
- Stomach aches, headaches, etc.
- Clinging to caregiver/separation fear
- Concentration problems
- School performance and attendance problems (this is a temporary situation)
- General worries
- Anxiety
- Closely observing parent(s) anxiety
- Fear
- Preoccupation with safety and danger

Pre-Adolescents/Adolescents: 12 to 18 years of age

- Increased withdrawal
- Self distractive behavior, such as sexual risk taking, substance abuse, reckless risk taking, etc.
- Becoming more accident prone
- Shortened sense of the future and changes in plans for the future(e.g., not going to college)
- Concentration problems
- School performance and attendance problems (this is a temporary situation)
- General worries
- Anxiety
- Suicide/Suicide packs
- Sleep problems

Pre-Adolescents/Adolescents: 12 to 18 years (cont.)

- Life-threatening re-enactment of the trauma/disaster
- Action oriented/wanting revenge
- Depression
- Changes in relationship patterns
- Rebellious behavior at home
- Self focused behavior (e.g., inability to think about others)
- Over- or under-eating (weight gain or weight loss)

Children and adolescents might have anxiety and fear that:

- Another disaster will happen
- Someone will die
- They will be separated from the rest of their family
- They will be left behind all alone

Parents can help their children and adolescents by:

- Talking about the disaster and the damage a disaster might create
- Deciding which number to call and a place to meet in case of a disaster
- Putting supplies together for an emergency preparedness kit
- Safeguarding personal possessions and storing them where they are protected in case of a disaster

Things that adults can do for children and adolescents following a disaster:

- Create an environment that is safe Provide reassurance
- Be understanding of the child/adolescent's need to mourn his/her own loss
- Provide age appropriate information about the disaster/trauma event calmly and factually
- Limit TV time, where the disaster/trauma event is reported on
- Create routines (for work, play meals, and rest). If possible maintain the same pre-disaster/trauma routines
- Involve children/adolescents by giving them chores to make them feel that they are helping to restore their family and community
- Spend extra time with children at bed time
- Do not punish the child for regressive behavior (know that this is only temporary)
- Praise and recognize responsible and age appropriate behavior
- Work with the school, since short term memory might be impacted which makes test taking challenging
- Remember that a decrease in grades/school performance is only temporary
- Consult with a school counselor or counselor should you be worried about behavior (especially risky behavior in adolescents)
- Do not ignore threats of harm to self or others, seek professional help
- Provide opportunities to talk about the disaster/trauma event, but do not pressure the child/adolescent
- Encourage your children and adolescents to help develop a family disaster plan

On-Line resources:

American Counseling Association: <http://www.counseling.org>

Disaster Help for Parents and Children: <http://www.childadvocate.net/disaster.htm>

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