



## Coping with Disaster: A Family Guide

A disaster can be a time of great stress for families as daily routines are changed by outside influences. Disasters leave victims with a damaged sense of safety, an uneasy sense of well-being, and varying degrees of emotional trauma. Children are especially vulnerable. Even if a child does not directly experience a disaster, the knowledge of it may be the first sign that the world is not always a safe place. Children need to be reassured that they will be taken care of. The following is a summary of effects on children and tips on helping.

### EFFECTS ON YOUNG CHILDREN (AGE 1 TO 5)

When disaster interrupts daily routines, children may become anxious or fearful. They depend on adults to help them through difficult times and restore some sense of security. Children of this age are strongly affected by the parents' reaction to the traumatic event.

#### **After a disaster, children are afraid that:**

- it will happen again
- someone will be hurt or killed
- they will be lost, or separated from their family
- they will be left alone

#### **Typical responses of preschool aged children:**

- Extreme fear of separation from parent(s)
- Crying, whimpering, trembling, excessive clinging
- Return to "younger" behaviors such as thumbsucking, wetting themselves or the bed, wanting a bottle, etc.
- Show distress over the loss of a toy, blanket or things that are very important to the child
- Nighttime fears, not wanting to go to bed, wanting light left on, nightmares
- Changes in eating or sleeping habits
- Aimless motion, hyperactive or aggressive behavior
- Telling exaggerated stories about the event; talking about it over and over
- Becoming withdrawn, less interactive, shy, afraid
- Complaints of aches and pains

### EFFECTS ON OLDER CHILDREN

Children ages 6 to 11 may have some of the reactions that younger children have. In addition, they may:

- Withdraw from friends
- Have problems paying attention or concentrating
- Fear going to school, or let school performance drop
- Have anger outbursts and fight
- Compete more for parents' attention
- Have sleep problems and nightmares
- Complain of stomach aches or other physical ailments
- Revert to "childish" behaviors
- Show loss of trust or anger with adults (who couldn't control the disaster)

**Adolescents (12-17)** respond similar to adults, but may also show some of the behaviors common to younger children. Typical responses include:

- Vague physical complaints
- Failing to do chores or school work
- Competition for attention

### HOW TO HELP YOUR FAMILY

Most children can cope successfully with a traumatic event if parents, family, friends and other adults provide support and reassurance. Help should start as soon as possible after the event.

- **Talk about the event**, and encourage family members to describe what they saw, heard, thought and felt. "Not talking about it" will only make the recovery more difficult.
- **Be honest, open and clear.** Give children the facts in words they can understand to avoid a child's imagination to fill in the details, which may be more horrifying than the reality. Telling what will happen next provides a sense of security.
- **Give reassurance children will be taken care of.** You may need to reassure them many times. Give extra cuddling, hugs, and focused attention. Do not be afraid of "spoiling" children during this time.
- **Listen!** Children need you to listen more than they need you to "make them feel better." Be prepared to hear the same details again and again. It's an attempt to regain control by understanding the event.
- **Stay together as a family** as much as possible. Make children a part of what you are doing to recover. If you need to separate, reassure children you will return, and tell them when.
- **Include children in recovery activities.** Chores and responsibility appropriate to age and abilities helps them feel less helpless. By helping and preparing for the future, they're reassured life will return to normal.
- **Maintain normal routines as much as possible.** Children find comfort in the fact that routines provide predictability. Take care to get plenty of rest and eat well. Healthy people are better able to cope and recover.
- **Modify your expectations.** Understand that performance at home, work or school may be affected temporarily. Set small, realistic goals. Break large overwhelming jobs into smaller manageable tasks. Allow others to help.
- **Let your children know others love and care about them.** Connect with family, friends and neighbors. Encourage them to share their experience by mailing letters or drawings, or talking on the phone.
- **Limit exposure to additional trauma, including news reports.** Watching sensational reports shown over and over again can cause people to re-live the traumatic experience.
- **Reassure children the disaster was not their fault.** Survivors guilt, although not rational, is a common response. People often wonder if there is "something more they could have done." Guilt may often be expressed in behaviors and emotions which are related to self-hatred or self-destruction.

### RESOURCES FOR HELP

A network of Child Guidance Programs located in County Health Departments throughout the state provide family support, parenting education and counseling services for families. For assistance, contact the County Health Department nearest you.

Child Guidance Programs  
Oklahoma State Department of Health  
[www.health.state.ok.us](http://www.health.state.ok.us)