

# Helping Your Child Cope with Disaster

It is normal for children to be afraid, especially after a natural disaster. The fear may last for an extended time and is best handled with kindness and understanding from parents and other adults. Children should be encouraged to talk about their feelings and express their fears through play, drawing, painting or clay/playdough.

Research indicates that children's fears vary according to age, maturation and previous learning experiences. Four major fears common in children are death, darkness, animals and abandonment.

Children's fears may be intensified when adults refuse or are reluctant to discuss them with children. Many families ban all painful topics from family conversation. Such strategies inflict high costs in terms of intensified despair and negativity among children. To help children cope with fears, adults must take the time to talk with children.

## **NDSU** **Extension Service**

North Dakota State University, Fargo, North Dakota

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## **Following a disaster some children may:**

- Be upset at the loss of a favorite toy, blanket, teddy bear, etc.
- Be angry. They may hit, throw, kick to show their anger.
- Become more active and restless.
- Be afraid of the disaster recurring. They may ask many times, "Will it come again?"
- Be afraid to be left alone or be afraid to sleep alone. Children may want to sleep with a parent or another person. They may have nightmares.
- Behave as they did when younger. They may start sucking their thumb, wetting the bed, asking for a bottle, wanting to be held.
- Have symptoms of illness such as nausea, vomiting, headaches, not wanting to eat, running a fever.
- Be quiet and withdrawn, not wanting to talk about the experience, become upset easily, crying and whining frequently.
- Feel guilty that they caused the disaster because of some previous behavior.
- Feel neglected by parents who are busy trying to clean up and rebuild their lives and homes.

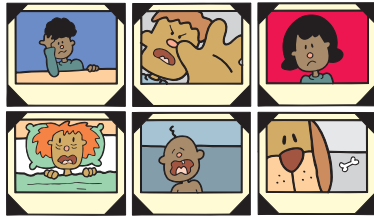
- Refuse to go to school or to child care arrangements. The child may not want to be out of the parent's sight.
- Become afraid of loud noises, rain, storms.
- Not show any outward sign of being upset. Some children may never show distress because they do not feel upset. Other children may not give evidence of being upset until several weeks or months later.
- You may need to repeat information and reassurances many times. Do not stop responding just because you told the child once or even 10 times.
- Hold your child. Provide comfort. Touching is important for children during this period. Close contact helps assure children that you are there and will not abandon them.
- Spend extra time putting your child to bed. Talk and offer assurance. Leave a night light on if that makes the child feel more secure.

## **What Parents Can Do To Help Children Cope with Feelings**

- Talk with your child, providing simple, accurate information to questions.
- Talk with your child about your own feelings.
- Listen to what your child says and how your child says it. Is there fear, anxiety, insecurity? Repeating the child's words may be very helpful, such as "You are afraid that..." or "You wonder if the storm will come again tonight." This helps both you and the child clarify feelings.
- Reassure your child, "We are together. We care about you. We will take care of you."
- Observe your child at play. Listen to what is said and how the child plays. Children frequently express feelings of fear or anger while playing with dolls, trucks or friends after a disaster.
- Provide play experiences to relieve tension. Work with playdough or paint, play in water, etc. If children show a need to hit or kick, give them something safe like a pillow, ball or balloon. Allow a safe, open space for them to play if possible.
- If your child lost a meaningful toy or blanket, allow the child to mourn and grieve (by crying, perhaps). It is all part of helping the young child cope with feelings about the disaster. In time, it may be helpful to replace the lost object.
- If you need help for your child, contact your Extension office, mental health agency or a clergy member.

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# Ideas for Helping Kids Deal with Stress

## Adults Can Help Kids Dealing with Stress

Parents and other adults play significant roles in helping children who are dealing with stress. They provide an example for children, act as a resource in helping children cope, and give guidance and support in managing emotions. Trying to return to a “normal” routine after moisture problems occur can be difficult since some of these problems may last for weeks or months. However, parents and other adults need to be attentive to children’s needs in helping them overcome fears or re-establish a sense of security. Parents tend to set the atmosphere that will help children cope or remain overly stressed.



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## Ideas for Helping Children

There are a variety of strategies that parents or other adults can use in helping children deal with stress. These may include:

- **Hold the child and provide physical comfort.** Children may naturally seek the comfort and security that comes from being held. Give children extra hugs, smiles and hand-holding. Set aside time just to sit next to a child, put your arm around them, or hold them on your lap and talk with them about their feelings.
- **Give your child verbal reassurance.** It is important for children to hear messages of support. Remember to tell them often that you love them, that everything will work out and that they are taken care of.
- **Be honest with the child about your feelings.** It helps children to know that parents may share some of their feelings. Answer your child’s questions in a simple, straightforward way. Share your own thoughts and feelings as appropriate.
- **Ask your child to share his or her own thoughts and feelings. Listen.** Parents can help children by encouraging their expression of feelings and listening carefully to them. Ask them to tell you if they feel scared, angry or frustrated. Help them realize such feelings are normal and that they can be worked out. Ask them for their ideas on how they might help with family needs or service.
- **Read books together that involve dealing with challenges.** A very effective technique is to buy, check out or borrow books that show children or families dealing with challenges and overcoming them. These may be books about dealing with floods or other challenges. Ask children what they

think about the characters and how they respond. Compare your own situation. Read books several times or leave them out for children to look at.

- **Use humor to lighten circumstances.** Laugh. Laugh some more! Humor, smiles and laughter relieve tension, especially for children.
- **Have children write or tell a story or draw a picture about the family experience.** Children often express emotion and deal with stressful situations through play or expressive behavior. Ask children to tell you a story about the moisture problems, or help them write a story about it. Record this and read it back to them. You may also have children draw pictures about the experience. Ask them about the picture and what it means.
- **Provide materials for dramatic play related to the experience.** Often children will gain a sense of control over difficult situations through dramatic play. Make available props or materials they can use to play the roles of firefighters, doctors or nurses, construction workers, safety personnel or other helpers. Help facilitate such play as appropriate, and give children feedback about what they express.
- **Establish and maintain consistent routines that provide security and familiarity to children.** As much as possible, adults should create and maintain some routines that children can rely on for security. This might include a particular routine at lunch, nap time, dinner or bed time. It might involve reading stories each night, rough-and-tumble playing or playing family games. Use these times to build security and reassure children.
- **Help children express and cope with grief or feelings of loss.** Some children may have lost valued items or toys due to moisture damage. It is natural for them to feel a sense of loss. Allow children to express their loss or frustration, and acknowledge the reality of their feelings. Plan to replace a lost object if appropriate.

- **Develop a plan with children for action to take in case of future problems or stress.** Children feel empowered if they know beforehand what might be done to respond to a flood or other concern. This may include a home evacuation drill, knowledge of contact information for safety experts or simply greater understanding of potential weather-related concerns such as thunderstorms. Discuss such issues with children and involve them in making plans that will aid in responding to future challenges. Practice emergency procedures so children are familiar with them.
- **Involve children in clean-up or repair activities as appropriate.** It can be helpful to give children something to do in responding to stress. Children benefit from feeling that they are making a contribution. As possible, find an appropriate activity that children or youth can do to help clean up, repair or otherwise assist with responding to a stressful situation. Perhaps they can perform a service activity for others in need.
- **Show an example of self-control and positive response to stress.** Children learn how to respond to stress by watching adults. Adults ought to set an example of self-control, maturity and positive resolution in dealing with challenges. This will comfort children and create a secure atmosphere for them.

## Taking Action to Reduce Stress

Set aside time to specifically think about the conditions in your own family and what things you can do to help your children deal with stress. Make a plan and follow up on the activities. Share what you have done with others who may be facing challenges.

