

# Helping Children Cope in the Aftermath of a Hurricane

When a hurricane causes destruction to a child's community, home, or school, and causes the death or injury of people important to the child, helping the child deal with these losses can seem overwhelming. However, with the proper support from a caring adult, children will be resilient and can heal from the effects of the hurricane.



## What to Expect: Normal Responses to a Hurricane

### Preschoolers (age 2-6):

- Uncontrollable crying
- Running aimlessly
- Excessive clinging and fear of being alone
- Regressive behavior
- Sensitive to loud noises
- Confusion and irritability
- Eating problems
- New fear of storms, wind, or water



### School Age (age 7-12):

- Non-specific physical complaints (aches and pains)
- Appetite changes
- Sleep changes (trouble falling asleep, bad dreams)
- Sadness
- Withdrawal from peers
- Irritability
- Whining, clinging
- Aggression and questioning authority
- School avoidance, loss of interest and difficulty concentrating in school
- Regressive behavior
- Rebellion at home or school
- New fear of storms, wind, or water

### Teen-agers (age 13-18):

- Non-specific physical complaints (aches and pains)
- Appetite changes
- Sleep changes (nightmares, trouble falling asleep)
- Sadness
- Withdrawal and isolation
- Irritability and acting out
- Excessive fears and worry
- Agitation and apathy
- Risk-taking behaviors
- Poor concentration
- Disenchantment (what's the point?)
- Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness
- New fear of storms, wind, or water

## The Grief Process

It is natural that, following a severe hurricane, a child will grieve the loss of loved ones, pets, toys, home and/or community. The intensity and duration of an individual's grief reaction depends on how significant the loss is perceived to be. The stages of grief are experienced differently by individuals. Fortunately, most children are able to work through grief and return to their previous level of emotional functioning, generally within several weeks. Sometimes, however, an individual may become stuck in one stage and have difficulty moving on to the next, or may skip a stage only to go back to it later.

### Stages of Grief

**Stage One: Denial.** The first stage consists of refusal to believe what has happened. During this stage, children sometimes "make believe" that the loss has either not occurred, or pretend that everything is "fine."

**Stage Two: Anger.** Once a child has stopped denying that the trauma has occurred, anger often follows. Anger can manifest itself in many ways, ranging from blaming others for the loss to turning anger inward and blaming oneself.

**Stage Three: Bargaining.** Anger then fades into attempts to bargain the trauma away. Children resort to this emotional strategy with the hope of removing the reality of what has happened. This bargaining can be with oneself (i.e., through thoughts like "maybe if I just become a better kid, everything will be back like it was before") or with God (i.e., "God, please make this hurricane never have happened and I promise to do whatever you want").

**Stage Four: Sadness.** When a child comes to realize the loss is permanent, sad feelings set in. This is often the most difficult stage to go through, both for children and their caregivers.

**Stage Five: Acceptance and Resolution.** During this stage, the child accepts the loss and is able to move on with his or her life. With resolution of the loss comes increased energy, renewed goals for the future, and return to previous level of functioning.

## How to Help

- The most important thing that you can do for your child is to appear calm. Your child looks to you to create a feeling of safety and security. Share in simple terms how you are feeling and explain ways that you are trying to cope with what happened. Vent your concerns, fears, and anxieties to a caring adult, not your child.
- Each child reacts to disaster according to his/her emotional and developmental stage. Each stage brings to a child a new understanding of the world and how events happen. Therefore, it is very important to explain the events in words that a child can understand.
- Emphasize that you and other adults are doing everything possible to make sure that people are safe, secure and free from harm.
- Be aware that your child will most likely receive information not only from you, but also from peers and the media. Ask your child about what he or she knows. If the child chooses to do so, let him or her explain in his or her own words the hurricane and its effects. This will provide you with the opportunity to clear up any misinformation or misconceptions.
- Minimize your child's exposure to media coverage of the hurricane. Viewing images or hearing descriptions of the hurricane and its aftermath will only heighten a child's anxiety. For example, a young child may not understand that media footage of collapsing buildings or distraught victims are replays of an event, and may think that a new hurricane has arrived.
- Provide children with the basic, accurate information that they need. Avoid details, as they will likely be upsetting.
- Be available and let your children ask questions. Know that you may need to repeat information that is difficult to understand.
- Respect your child's feelings, thoughts and reactions, even if they are different from your own.
- Talk about ways that your child can help other victims of the hurricane. Writing cards, sending drawings, or volunteering time can help you and a child contribute to the community healing process.
- Some children may not want to talk about their feelings or fears. Help them express how they are feeling through drawing, playing, writing or other age appropriate activities.

### Activity Idea

Invite your child or a group of children to draw or create an image of a place that feels safe and comfortable. Next, ask your child to describe the place that he or she has created. Depending on what was created, you may ask questions such as:

"What does it look like?" "What is there?"

What do you hear, smell, feel, touch

and taste in this place?" "What things

in this place help you? Are there

special people who you'd like to be there

to keep you safe?" Use this activity to

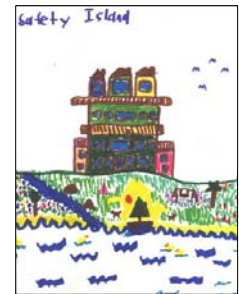
learn about what helps your child to feel

calm and safe. With the information

learned, you can help your child during

times of stress by re-creating that safe

place with calming toys, sounds, or other objects.



## When to Contact a Mental Health Professional

Some of the normal reactions described here may not appear immediately, or may occur weeks after the hurricane. When occurring during the few weeks following a trauma, your child's reactions are normal and expected. Because the hurricane may have displaced you and your family and severely disrupted normal routines, a child may need an even longer recovery time. If your family has settled into a new post-hurricane life, but your child's emotional responses have persisted for a long period of time or are accompanied by significant functional impairment, then you should seek assistance from a mental health professional. If your child is "stuck" on the hurricane, and keeps re-living it in thoughts, feelings, images or behavior, talk with your primary care physician or pediatrician about getting a referral for a child and adolescent psychiatrist, social worker, psychologist or other mental health professional that has experience working with children. You can also contact your local school, children's hospital, or community mental health organization and ask for a referral in your area.

## Living in a Hurricane Prone Area

If you have not been displaced by the hurricane or decide to return home after having been displaced, your child may have fears associated with living in an area where a hurricane has struck. Make a plan with your child about what to do to prepare for a future hurricane. The plan should include where to seek shelter and safety, as well as ways to communicate with each other should you be separated during or after the storm. As your child could be at school when a disaster strikes, it is also a good idea to familiarize yourself with the emergency plan of your child's school and make sure your own plan is compatible with the school's plan. Having a plan will give the child a sense of mastery over the danger and help to calm fears.

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