

# Preparing Your Family for Disasters



Whether it is a hurricane, terrorist attack, or some other traumatic event that threatens your family, there are important basic ways that you can prepare yourself and your children. If an event does occur, being prepared will lessen the negative impact of the event on your family and will help you and your children to be more resilient.

## Educate Yourself

*Know where to go for information.*

In the aftermath of a disaster, the public's need for immediate information can lead to the circulation of rumors and false information. Know in advance of any event where you will get your updates and instructions from. Federal agencies, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, are excellent information sources. You may also contact your local health department or hospital, or your child's pediatrician for information.

*Know the terminology.*

The information that you receive will only be useful if you understand what is being said. In the middle of a crisis, unfamiliar technical words can be confusing and anxiety provoking. Familiarize yourself with disaster terminology.

*Know what children's normal responses to stress are.*

Differentiating between an emotional response to a disaster and actual exposure to a hazardous substance can be difficult, as the symptoms of stress, such as headaches or nausea, can sometimes look like the symptoms of exposure. Educating yourself about children's normal responses to a stressful situation will help prepare you to make this distinction for your child in the event of a disaster. Normal reactions include:



- Non-specific physical complaints (aches and pains)
- Sensitivity to loud noises
- Eating problems
- Sleep changes (trouble falling asleep, bad dreams)
- Poor concentration
- Confusion and irritability

If you think that your child may have been exposed to a hazardous substance or his or her symptoms persist, call your pediatrician.

*Know how to take care of yourself.*

The better you cope during a traumatic event, the better your children will cope. Familiarize yourself with what you will need to do to take care of yourself so that you will be prepared should a disaster occur.

- Set realistic goals for what you can accomplish each day
- Eat right, rest, and exercise
- Celebrate small successes
- Nurture yourself- do not stop enjoying family and friends
- If you are feeling overwhelmed, seek help

## Educate Your Children

Provide children with the basic, accurate information that they need. This information will depend on the event. Use your judgment and your knowledge of your children as you decide what you will tell them. Avoid details, as they will likely be upsetting. Each child reacts to disaster according to his/her emotional and developmental

### Useful Definitions

**Decontamination:** To make safe by eliminating poisonous or otherwise harmful substances, such as chemicals or radioactive material. Decontamination often involves specially constructed showers in which individuals can wash off the dangerous substance with water and soap. Sometimes, healthcare providers will supply brushes to aid in the removal of the substance. If your child must go through decontamination, you may not be able to be present during that time to avoid exposing you to the toxic material.

**Quarantine:** Enforced isolation or restriction of free movement imposed to prevent the spread of contamination. Quarantine can be very traumatic if children and parents are separated. Authorities will make every effort to keep children and parents together and to provide methods of communication when necessary.

**Lock-Down:** When entrances and exits to a building are in effect sealed to protect individuals in the building from a dangerous situation. Depending on the event, a lock-down could last for days. An office, school, or even hospital can go into lock-down.

**Personal Protective Gear:** Articles worn to protect individuals from disease or hazardous substances. Face masks and full body suits, called "Hazmat Suits," are examples. Young children may find these suits frightening, and may have difficulty understanding what a healthcare provider is saying if the provider is wearing a respirator.

stage. Therefore, it is very important to explain the events in words that a child can understand. 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 appear different from your own.

## Make a Plan

*What is in a family disaster plan?*

Having a disaster plan will not only prepare your family with the logistical considerations that you will need to have in place in the event of an emergency, but will also give your children a sense of mastery over the threatening danger and help to ease fears.

- Make sure all children have work phone numbers and cell phone numbers for parents.
- Agree upon a meeting place to find one another should you and your child separate.
- Make sure your child knows how to contact EMS and dial 911.
- Make sure your child's school has your contact information, other emergency contact numbers, information about your meeting place, and his or her pediatrician's number.
- If your child has special health needs, make sure to have an Emergency Information Form filled out by your child's doctor and available for schools in case of emergency.
- Contact your local Red Cross to learn about additional ways to plan for particular disasters common in your region.

Before a traumatic event occurs it is also an excellent idea to think about the individuals that form your personal support network and consider when and how you would reach out to these individuals. Identify the people that you can rely on to:

- Get a message to family and friends
- Watch your children
- Take care of your house and pets
- Talk to about what you have experienced

## Build Resilience

*What is resilience?*

Resilience is the ability to cope with stress, to bounce back from difficult times, and to adapt well to trying situations. It is always a good idea to work on fostering resilience in your family, as it will prepare your children to deal with day-to-day stressors, as well as disaster situations.

*How do we build resilience?*

Parents should focus on the development of the following skills that help build and maintain resilience in children:

- Social skills/relationship building: Learning how to form positive and healthy relationships with both adults and other children. Receiving social support from others is very helpful in making it through tough times.
- Effective and assertive communication: Learning how to make wants and needs known in an appropriate manner. Children who do not learn how to communicate in an assertive manner often either communicate through aggression (hitting, fighting, yelling) or become very passive (do not communicate and let others take advantage of them).
- Emotion expression and regulation: Learning how to express emotions and to regulate (control) them. Without this skill, children can become overwhelmed, confused, and sometimes aggressive.
- Empathy, caring and reaching out: Learning the ability to put oneself in someone else's shoes and feel what they feel. Reaching out and supporting another who has also experienced a loss can be healing for both the giver and the receiver.
- Problem solving: Learning to think, plan, and problem-solve in an organized and clear manner. This builds independence, self-competence, and increased overall ability.

*Characteristics of families that build resilience:*

- Parents show an interest in their children's lives and who involve themselves in their children's activities.
- Stable and consistent home routines (for instance, regular family time, chores that each family member is expected to complete, family outings).
- Parents emphasize to their children the importance of doing well in school.
- Open family communication.

