

Preparing for Hurricane Irma: Helping Children Cope

Large-scale disasters, such as major hurricanes can have a strong emotional effect even for people not directly affected by the event. The scope of devastation and loss of life can be very disturbing and hard to comprehend. Common reactions include sadness, concern for loved-ones in affected areas, anxiety over a large-scale disaster occurring at home, and the strong desire to help. Adults can help children by supporting their emotional and psychological needs, helping them understand the events factually, and providing the opportunity to process their reactions, as needed.

Identify vulnerable children and youth. The degree to which children are affected will vary depending on personal circumstances. Most vulnerable are children who:

- Had family members killed, injured, or missing in the disaster.
- Originally come from or have family still living in devastated communities.
- Have a strong sense of religious or cultural identity with the affected countries.
- Live in potentially vulnerable areas.
- Are survivors of other natural disasters.
- Have recently lost a loved one, particularly a parent.
- Suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder, depression or other mental health disorder.

Talk to your children and students. At home or in class, take the time to discuss events factually. Use a map or globe and provide relevant information about seismology, geography, cultural issues, emergency and public health services, etc. Allow children to discuss their feelings and concerns and encourage questions. Acknowledge and normalize their feelings. Let them know that others share their feelings and that their reactions are common and expected.

Be a good listener and observer. Let children guide you as to how concerned they are or how much information they need. If they are not focused on the tragedy, don't dwell on it. But be available to answer their questions to the best of your ability. Young children may not be able to express themselves verbally. Pay attention to changes in their behavior or social interactions. Most school age children and adolescents can discuss their thoughts and feelings although they may need you to provide an "opening" to start a conversation.

Highlight people's compassion and humanity. Large-scale tragedies often generate a tremendous outpouring of caring and support from around the world. Focus on the aid being provided by governments, non-profit aid agencies, and individual donors. Discuss the truly Herculean logistical process of getting aid to the most impacted areas and the cooperation between leaders and people of so many nations.

Do something positive with your children or students to help others in need. Taking positive action is one of the most powerful ways to help children feel more in control and to build a stronger sense of connection. Suggestions include making individual donations to international disaster relief organizations, holding a school or community fundraiser, or even working to support families in need within the community.

Emphasize people's resiliency. Help children understand the ability of people to come through a tragic event and go on with their lives. Focus on children's own competencies in terms of their daily life

and in difficult times. In age appropriate terms, identify other disasters from which communities or countries have recovered.

Be honest. Acknowledge your thoughts and feelings. Be sure your comments are age appropriate but even young children will feel more reassured and closer to you if you are honest. For older children, it is okay to admit that you feel sad, perhaps a little helpless that you cannot do more to make a difference, or even awed at the sheer power and violence of nature. Balance statements of concern with information about our emergency preparedness and response systems here at home.

Monitor the news. It is important to stay informed, but exposure to endless news may not be helpful. Images of the disaster itself and the resulting human suffering from injury, hunger and disease can become overwhelming. Young children cannot distinguish between images on T.V. and their personal reality. Older children may choose to watch the news, but be available to discuss what they see and help put it into perspective.

Maintain as much continuity and normalcy as possible. At home, spending family time doing regular activities, including eating meals together, reinforces children's sense of stability and connectedness. At school, allowing students to deal with their reactions is important but so is providing a sense of normalcy. Regular classes, after school activities, and friends can help students feel more secure and better able to function.

Know potential child/adolescent reactions to trauma. Most children will be able to cope with their concerns over current events with the help of parents and other caring adults. However, some children may be at risk of more extreme reactions because of personal circumstances. Symptoms may differ depending on age. Adults should contact a professional if children exhibit significant changes in behavior or any of the following symptoms over an extended period.

- **Preschoolers**—thumb sucking, bedwetting, clinging to parents, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, fear of the dark, regression in behavior, withdrawal from friends and routines.
- **Elementary School Children**—irritability, aggressiveness, clinginess, nightmares, school avoidance, poor concentration, withdrawal from activities and friends.
- **Adolescents**—sleeping and eating disturbances, agitation, increase in conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behavior and poor concentration.

Resources

All handouts referenced above can be accessed at

http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/index.aspx .There are many organizations and agencies with helpful information about helping children and families cope with natural disasters and other crises.