



HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH DISASTER

When there is major interruption in the natural flow of life, children can experience anxiety and fear. Disasters such as earthquakes and fires are dramatic and intense experiences, especially unsettling to children.

During and after these problem times, adults can help children cope by understanding (1) what children feel, (2) how they act, and (3) what actions can be taken to deal with distress.

Children traumatized by events or disasters often experience a pervasive sense of loss:

- ◆ loss of feeling safe
- ◆ loss of identity/future
- ◆ loss of feeling of control over one's life
- ◆ loss of trust in others
- ◆ loss of hope
- ◆ loss of personal power

In children, such feelings of loss may present in physical symptoms

- ◆ headaches
- ◆ aches & pains
- ◆ overeating or loss of appetite
- ◆ bowel problems
- ◆ skin disorders
- ◆ sleep disorders
(*nightmares or excessive sleeping*)

or emotional/behavioral reactions

- ◆ loss of interest in activities
- ◆ decreased performance levels
- ◆ disruptive behavior
- ◆ resistance to authority
- ◆ increased difficulty in relating to parents and siblings
- ◆ sadness or depression
- ◆ anti-social behavior such as stealing or lying

These reactions are understandable.

Fear and anxiety are normal reactions to danger. Recognize that a child's fears may arise

from imagination as well as "accurate" reactions to real events.

Dealing With Distress

- ◆ Talk openly about feelings of fear and anxiety.
- ◆ Reassure children by word and deed.
(*"We are together and we are safe."*)
- ◆ Keep the family together. This provides concrete reassurance.
- ◆ Listen to what children say about their fears.
- ◆ Encourage them to talk.
(*"It is normal and natural to be afraid."*)
- ◆ Restore a sense of routine and avoid inactivity.
- ◆ Be aware of your own feelings and the effect these feelings have on children.
- ◆ Don't focus on temporary, immature behavior.
- ◆ Give additional attention and reassurance.
- ◆ Encourage contact with friends.
- ◆ Rehearse safety measures to be taken in future disasters.

When Problems Persist

Talk with a counselor or family therapist. With professional assistance, "adjustment reactions" can be dealt with relatively quickly and easily.

Children can be helped to put earlier trauma behind and deal effectively with the current situation.

Call Project REBOUND's crisis hotline, 1(800) 854-7771, for information or referral. Trained, multi-lingual operators can provide assistance free of charge.

Project REBOUND

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