

# Helping Your Child Cope With Disaster

## WAYS TO HELP CHILDREN DEAL WITH STRESS

**Emotional support of children is very important during a disaster. If not addressed, a child's fears may continue long after the actual disaster has passed. Young children are particularly at risk during these times because of their deep sense of vulnerability, their lack of understanding and their difficulty in communicating how they feel. Older children are affected too. Like their younger siblings, they might find it difficult to express their feelings. They may be terribly frightened of how the disaster might affect their future.**

**Fortunately, parents and other adults can make a great difference in how children deal with stress. Your love and support can carry children over the rough spots. Initially, it helps to recognize some normal reactions that children may have to disaster. From there, you can take practical steps to foster understanding and support.**

### FEARS

It is normal for children to be afraid, especially with the uncertainty brought by natural disasters like a flood or tornado. The fear may last for an extended period of time and is best dealt with by kindness and understanding on the part of parents. Children should be encouraged to talk about their feelings and express their fears through play, drawing, painting or working with clay.

Children's fears vary according to age, maturity and previous learning experience. Four major fears common in children are: death, darkness, animals and abandonment. If they have experienced flooding, fire or tornado, children may have encountered several of these fears.

Fears may be intensified when adults back away from discussing the topic with children. Many families ban all painful topics from family conversation. A better approach is to openly talk with your children about their feelings.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

- ◆ *Talk with your child, providing simple, accurate information to questions.* This helps avoid the fear of the unknown.
- ◆ *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 flood will come again tonight?" This helps both you and the child clarify feelings.
- ◆ *Make sure children know the family's difficulties are not their fault.* Children tend to blame themselves for problems.
- ◆ *Reassure your child with statements such as "We are together. We care about you. We will take care of you."* You may need to repeat information and reassurances many times.
- ◆ *Hold your child.* Provide comfort. Touching is important for children during this period. Close contact helps assure children that you are there for them and will not abandon them.
- ◆ *Involve children.* Let them help fill a sandbag or participate in a safe, simple clean-up activity. This helps them feel they are part of the family. It also helps them feel needed, appreciated and useful.
- ◆ *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.

- ◆ *Observe your child at play.* Listen to what is said and watch how the child plays. Children frequently express feelings of fear or anger while playing with dolls, trucks or friends after a major disaster.
- ◆ *Provide play experiences to relieve tension.* Work with clay and 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). In time, it may be helpful to replace the lost object.
- ◆ *Contact a community resource such as your doctor, mental health agency or minister if you sense you need outside help for a child.*
- ◆ *Keep your sense of humor and enjoy a good laugh together frequently.*
- ◆ *Take care of your own emotions and stress.* Children will reflect your anxiety or your calm.

**Additional resources:**

Your county family living agent;  
Farmers Assistance Hotline (for Wisconsin farm families), (800) 942-2474; health and human service workers; clergy; school personnel; financial and legal assistance agencies; UW-Extension video "Managing During Tough Times," (VB0052)

**Related publications:**

UW-Extension publications—

"Managing Between Jobs — Controlling Stress," (B3459-11);

"Managing Farm Stress," (B2744-1).