

Helping Children Recover

Be Informed. Make a Plan. Build a Kit.

Children are more likely than adults to be emotionally traumatized by a disaster. Parents, teachers, and caregivers can help prevent serious psychological consequences by observing, listening, and talking to children.

Look for signs of distress.

Young Children

Children who are preschool-age and younger may not have words to describe their experiences, but that does not mean they are unaware of the circumstances around them. Common signs of distress include:

- Crying more than usual
- Increased irritability
- Changes in eating habits
- Stomachaches and headaches
- Fear of the dark
- Bad dreams
- Regressing to immature behaviors like bed-wetting and thumb-sucking
- Some children may become noisy and hyperactive. Others may become shy and cling to parents.

School-aged Children

Young children, age six to 11 years, are better able to understand the consequences of a disaster. This age group may be able to express sadness, anger, and grief over losses. Some may fear that another disaster will occur or become so preoccupied by thoughts of the disaster they have difficulty concentrating on schoolwork. A sudden drop in grades could indicate distress. Some may irrationally believe they were the cause of

the disaster, damage, or loss. Children in this age group may or may not be able to verbalize their thoughts.

Adolescents

Adolescents commonly experience intense emotions. Following a disaster, they may feel overwhelmed but be unable to talk about their feelings.

The adolescent years are normally a time when teenagers are interested in moving out into the world. Disasters can change an adolescent's natural inclination, making the world seem dangerous and frightening. Instead of wanting to socialize, some adolescents may become afraid to leave home.

Others who feel they have lost control over their lives may begin to experiment with high-risk behaviors like:

- Alcohol use/abuse
- Drug use
- Sexual activity
- Reckless driving
- Suicide ideation

Make Time to Listen

Give children/adolescents opportunities to talk. Some children, particularly teenagers, may be reluctant to talk. Try getting them to open up while you are engaged in activities like chores, driving, or recreation.

Give children/adolescents permission to feel and express their emotions. There is no such thing as a bad or wrong emotion. During times of disaster, it's normal to feel sad, angry, and afraid.

