

Children May Experience Long Term Effects of Disaster

Kansas State University • Cooperative Extension Service • Manhattan, Kansas

Children need time to heal from traumatic events. Studies of children following natural disasters have shown that children may experience emotional and behavioral effects for months, one year or even two years following the disaster.

- Nightmares become more common, especially about the disaster. Vivid memories may intrude during the day.
- Young children reenact parts of the disaster in their play.
- Storms bring fear.
- Preschoolers tend to personify the disaster in some way. The flood may become like an evil person in their eyes.
- Children generally feel more anxiety than their parents are aware of. Increasing physical complaints (headaches, stomach aches) may be caused by stress and anxiety.
- Academic performance suffers; falling grades, disruptiveness in class, rudeness and falling asleep in class contribute to academic problems.
- After severe disasters, even children as young as 7 and 8 have attempted suicide.
- Children, as well as adults, may be sad and long for “the way life used to be.” Some children withdraw from life.
- Sleep may be difficult.
- They may become upset easily or hide their distress to *protect* other family members.
- Boys tend to have more difficulty talking about their losses and showing their feelings. They may act out instead.
- Children also develop in character. Many show insight and increasing concern for

others. Adolescents tend to lose some of their sense of invulnerability. They realize they, or someone like them, could be devastated by a similar disaster.



The intensity of a child's reaction depends on a variety of factors: amount of loss and threat to life, the family's reaction, stress or a troubled home before the disaster, and violence in the home. Any kind of marked change in behavior may indicate a strong need for mental health consultation. Extreme behaviors also signal a need for intervention. Destructive acts toward property, harming pets or people, frequent panic attacks or substance abuse call for immediate action on the child's behalf. Other changes that justify intervention are: an inability or unwillingness to socialize, feeling responsible for the disaster or the family's losses, or a significant drop in school performance that lasts more than a few weeks.

Especially for Parents: Helping Your Child Adjust

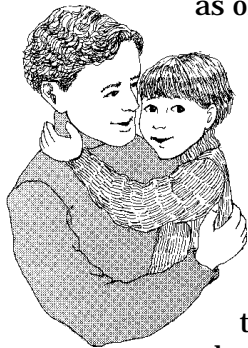
Reassure your child that, most importantly, you still have one another and you plan to stay together.

Return to your family's daily routine as soon as possible: meal times, bedtime rituals, birthday celebrations.

Children's coping often depends on how well their parents are coping. If you find yourself depressed, rageful or tempted to lash out at your family, stop and evaluate your coping methods. Consider visiting a counselor, mental health professional or member of clergy to talk about other ways of coping. Share your feelings with a trusted friend. When parents do not deal well with their own feelings, children may suffer longer and more intensely.

Share your grief over the disaster. This helps your child express feelings, too. Talk about the family's losses and plans for coping: financial realities, how long it may take to recover, accepting some losses as permanent. Make explanations simple for young children.

Children often express fear and anger through their play. Acknowledge their feelings as okay.



Hold and comfort your child.

Children generally accept your religious beliefs.

These beliefs may be comforting now. Or your child may be confused:

"How could our God allow this to happen?" Encourage their questions, and answer

honestly even if the answer is "I don't know." Together, take these questions to a religious leader who can help you find answers, strengthening both your faith and your family.

If your child lost a special possession, allow time to grieve and cry. This is part of helping your child deal with feelings about the disaster.

Prepare a family emergency plan. Knowing what to do in the event of another emergency will reduce your child's anxiety.

Help others, locally and nationally, as they respond to disasters. Send clothes, food, toys or encouraging letters.

Especially for Teachers: Helping Children Who Hurt after the Disaster

1. Incorporate healing activities into the classroom.

After a disaster, children need physical, tangible ways to experience and express grief. Acting out or writing their *disaster story* can offer relief. Talk about how the disaster has changed their personal history and the history of the community to help children understand that they are not alone in their loss. Rituals are very important. Perhaps all the children in the class can work together to create a ritual or ceremony to commemorate their losses and their hopes for the future.

These kinds of activities may adapt well to English, Social Science or History classes.

2. Look out for depression.

In the months after the disaster, distress may settle into depression for both parents and children. Childhood depression doesn't look like *adult* depression, but it is important to diagnose. Depression, particularly in teens, may lead to suicide attempts.

Depression in Preschoolers: tantrums, physical complaints, brief periods of sadness, listlessness or hyperactivity, lack of interest in activities, withdrawal.

Depression in ages 5-11: phobias, hyperactivity, conduct disorders (lying, stealing), refusal to attend school, refusal to leave parents, periods of sadness, vague anxiety or agitation, suicidal thoughts.

Depression in Adolescents: changes in appearance, withdrawal, fatigue, eating problems, substance abuse, risk-taking, sudden change in peer group, loss of interest, sleep problems, hostility, suicidal thoughts.

If you suspect a child is suffering from depression, suggest that the parents have the child evaluated by a physician or a psychologist for a diagnosis. You also might refer the child to the school counselor or social worker.

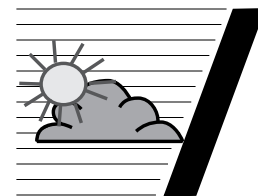
3. Be alert to increased problems at home.

Increased family stress during the months after the disaster may ignite violence—violence among adults and/or violence against children. Be aware of changes in children's behavior that may indicate violence at home. Report any signs of violence to Child Protective Services.

Violence at Home Means Children at Risk *Recognizing the Signs*

Academics

- Truancy
- Poor performance—the home environment is not conducive to studying.



- Difficulty relating to school authority figures

Other children find school a distraction from their problems at home. They may appear to be model students; but they may show other signs of a violent home.

Social

- Verbal put-downs
- Distrust adults: they do not trust parents and project that distrust onto other adults.
- Show passive or aggressive responses to conflict

Adolescents are especially anxious about peers. They fear others will uncover their secret and ostracize or ridicule them. These adolescents may isolate themselves from peers.

Emotional

- Crying or reluctance when it is time to go home
- Fear; some may be startled by unexpected noises or arguments at school
- Hostility
- Express anger through character assassination: swearing, name calling, put-downs, criticisms.

Other

- Listlessness—may have been kept up all night by fighting
- Marks and bruises
- Disheveled clothes
- Acting out

What You Can Do If You Suspect Violence At Home

- **Recognize the signs.**
- **Listen to the child. Ask “Are things difficult at home?” Make no judgments about the family; just listen. Take the child seriously. Reassure the child that he or she is not at fault. This, in itself, offers a lot of relief.**
- **Never offer a *quick fix*.**
- **Never agree to *keep it a secret*.**
- **Involve the appropriate school staff: counselors, social workers, etc.**
- **Consult local agencies like Child Protective Services.**
- **If you suspect there is violence in the home, report it. Children in violent homes often become targets of violence. Report early—prevent abuse of this child.**
- **Be a friend to the child. Find genuine abilities and characteristics to praise. Be generous with praise and affection.**
- **Encourage the child to find physical outlets, like running, to vent stored up anger.**
- **If agencies do not or are not able to address the violent home at this point, stay alert for signs of child abuse.**

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