

# How to Help Children Cope After an Emergency

## Emergencies

An emergency is an unexpected, dangerous event that occurs. It can cause harm to the people involved, those who see it happen and property (buildings, vehicles, etc.). Examples of emergencies include:

- tornadoes, hurricanes and other natural disasters
- fires
- violence and/or attacks
- accidents (car, airplane, boat)
- drownings
- medical events (heart attack, stroke)
- injuries
- choking events.

## Responses to Emergencies

Everyone responds to emergencies differently. Some may experience stress right away and others may feel the effects later on. Symptoms of stress can be physical, emotional, spiritual, behavioral or cognitive (thinking problems).

Emergencies can be especially traumatic for children. All children will not respond to an emergency event in the same way. However, it is helpful to be aware of some of the possible reactions children may have so you can better understand what they're going through and provide support.

## Signs and Symptoms of Stress in Children

**Common physical reactions to stress (without a known physical cause) include:**

- headache
- nausea (upset stomach)
- changes in eating habits
- difficulty with speech
- skin problems (rashes, redness).

**Common emotional reactions to stress include:**

- feelings of anxiety and nervousness
- fear of the event happening again
- fear of being alone (especially being separated from family)
- clinging to a parent or adult
- feeling unsafe
- feeling irritable
- sadness and/or depression
- anger
- guilt.

**Common spiritual reactions to stress include:**

- feeling as if they've lost meaning to their lives
- a feeling of hopelessness or failure.

They may also question things they believed to be true in the past.

*(over)*

## Common behavioral reactions to stress include:

- “childish” behavior
- withdrawal or temper tantrums
- risky behaviors
- problems at bedtime
  - not being able to fall asleep
  - waking up during the night
  - fear of the dark
  - wetting the bed (when he or she didn’t before the event occurred)
  - fear that the event will happen again during the night.

## Common cognitive (thinking) reactions to stress include:

- confusion or memory loss
- forgetfulness
- poor schoolwork
- disorientation (losing sense of direction)
- difficulty concentrating.

## How to Help Children Cope

During and after an emergency, children will look to their parents or other adults for help and as models for how to act.

You can help children cope by doing the following:

- **Help the child feel safe.** Provide for basic needs such as food, water and a safe environment. Reunite the child with loved ones if he or she has been separated. Familiar surroundings and routines help the child gain a sense of control.
- **Help the child to feel calm and comforted.** Be compassionate and patient toward the child, even if he or she is behaving poorly. Speak in a calm voice and ask questions to help him or her work through feelings of stress and anxiety. Be a good listener. Being silent is OK.

- **Help the child to understand what happened.** Ask what he or she is thinking and feeling. It is important for the child to understand what happened without feeling overwhelmed by overly dramatic or emotional stories, videos or photos of the event. Take time to talk about what you have read, watched or heard and ask if he or she has any questions. Remind the child that you don’t have all the answers.
- **Help the child feel connected.** Provide opportunities to spend time with family and friends and for other group activities. Older children may benefit from volunteering.
- **Allow the child to express his or her emotions.** Express your own emotions too.
- **Hold and comfort the child even when you don’t know what to say.**
- **Talk about the frightening things that have happened.** Ignoring these things will not make them go away.
- **Help the child to feel empowered.** Ask if he or she can make a few goals and help him or her reach them. Make sure the goals are small and realistic so they aren’t overwhelming. Completing simple tasks may provide the motivation needed to resume his or her normal activities. Participating in family activities can help life feel “normal.”

## Whom to Call With Questions

If you have questions or concerns, please call your primary care provider. He or she can provide community resources or make a referral to a specialist if needed.

**If you are or someone close to you is in crisis, call the free, 24-hour National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255).**