

How to Help Children Cope After an Emergency

Emergencies

An emergency is an unexpected, dangerous event. It can cause harm to people and property. Examples of emergencies include:

- accidents such as car, airplane, boat
- drownings
- fires
- medical events such as:
 - choking
 - heart attack
 - injuries
 - stroke.
- natural disaster such as:
 - earthquake
 - flood
 - hurricane
 - tornado
- violence and/or attacks.

Responses to Emergencies

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

Emergencies can be traumatic for children. All children do not respond to an emergency in the same way. It is helpful to be aware of some 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:

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

Common emotional reactions to stress include:

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

Common spiritual reactions to stress include:

- a feeling of hopelessness or failure
- feeling as if their lives have lost meaning.
- questioning things they believed to be true in the past.

(over)

Common behavioral reactions to stress include:

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

Common cognitive (thinking) reactions to stress include:

- confusion or memory loss
- difficulty concentrating
- disorientation (losing sense of direction)

How to Help Children Cope

Children look to their parents or other adults for help and as models for how to act during and after an emergency. 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 they have been separated. Familiar surroundings and routines help the child gain a sense of control.
- **Help the child feel calm and comforted.** Be compassionate and patient even if the child is behaving poorly. Be a good listener. Speak in a calm voice and ask questions to help them work through stress and anxiety. Being silent is OK.
- **Help the child understand what happened.** Ask what they are thinking and feeling. It’s important for the child to understand what happened without feeling overwhelmed

by dramatic or emotional stories, videos or photos of the event. Take time to talk about what you have read, watched or heard. Ask if they have questions. Remind the child that you don’t have all the answers.

- **Help the child feel connected.** Spend time with family and friends and in other group activities. Older children may benefit from volunteering.
- **Allow the child to express their 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 feel empowered.** Ask if they can make a few goals and help them reach these goals. Make sure the goals are small and realistic. Completing simple tasks may provide the motivation needed to resume normal activities. Participating in family activities can help life feel “normal.”

Whom to Call With Questions

If you have questions or concerns, call your primary care provider. They 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).