

## Natural Disasters: Brief Facts and Tips

- Experiencing a dangerous or violent flood, storm, or earthquake can be especially traumatic for children and youth, and the devastation to the familiar environment can be long-lasting and distressing.
- Children look to the significant adults in their lives for guidance on how to manage their reactions after the immediate threat is over. Parents, teachers, and other caregivers can help children and youth cope in the aftermath of a natural disaster by remaining calm and reassuring children that they will be all right.
- There are a number of common reactions following a natural disaster; however, children's reactions may differ according to age and developmental level.
  - **Preschool**—Regressive behaviors, decreased verbalization, increased anxiety.
  - **Elementary**—Poor attention/concentration, school avoidance, irritability, clinginess, aggression, somatic complaints, nightmares, social withdrawal.
  - **Middle and High School**—Sleeping and eating disturbances, agitation, increase in conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behavior, and poor concentration.
- Several risk factors may impact the severity of a child's reactions. These include exposure to the actual event, personal injury or loss of a loved one, level of parental support, dislocation from their home or community, the level of physical destruction, and pre-existing risks, such as a previous traumatic experience or mental illness.
- Issues associated with specific disasters are listed below.
  - **Hurricanes.** Usually hurricanes are predicted in advance, giving communities time to prepare and families time to gather supplies and evacuate if needed. But there is still potential for fear and anxiety about the potential impact from the fierce winds and rain. Children may exhibit exaggerated startle responses, anxiety, and significant stress during or immediately after a hurricane. As a result, children may re-experience similar stress reactions when subsequent severe weather events occur.
  - **Earthquakes.** Aftershocks differentiate earthquakes from other natural disasters. Since there is no clearly defined endpoint, the disruptions caused by continued tremors may increase psychological distress. In addition, earthquakes occur with virtually no warning, which limits individuals' ability to make the psychological adjustments that can facilitate coping and can create a sense of helplessness. Aftershocks and destruction may result in a longer period of time until children truly feel safe.
  - **Tornadoes.** Like earthquakes, individuals typically have little time to prepare for tornados. It can be difficult to cope with the sights and smells of destruction following a tornado. In

addition, survivor guilt has been observed to be an especially common coping challenge. For instance, some children may express guilt that they still have a house to live in while their friend next door does not.

- **Floods.** Flash floods are the most dangerous of these common disasters, as they occur without warning and move at intense speeds. Most floods do not recede overnight, and residents may have to wait days or weeks before they can begin cleanup efforts, resulting in a delay in emotional recovery.
  - **Wildfires.** Often, there is some warning of an advancing wildfire. However, depending upon the wind and terrain, the direction and spread of a wildfire can change abruptly. Depending upon the need to evacuate, and the extent of the damage, children and families may be displaced and consequently may struggle to recover.
- Recovery takes time. Survivors may have to deal with the disaster aftermath for months or even years. Advance preparation and coordination with supporting agencies will facilitate problem solving and support family coping. Changes brought about by disaster experiences create a “new normal” for survivors.
  - Helpful strategies for adults following a natural disaster are listed below.
    - Remain calm and reassuring.
    - Acknowledge and normalize their feelings.
    - Encourage children to talk about disaster-related events.
    - Promote positive coping and problem-solving skills.
    - Emphasize children’s resiliency.
    - Strengthen children’s friendship and peer support.
    - Take care of your own needs, and avoid using drugs or alcohol to feel better.

## REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

- Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Youth Preparedness Program, <https://www.ready.gov/kids>
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, <http://www.nctsn.org/resources>
- “Relocated Students With Special Needs: Recommendations for Receiving Schools” and “New Schools for Students With Disabilities: Tips for Relocated Families” <http://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources/school-safety-and-crisis>

*Adapted from “Natural Disasters” (pp. 435–450), by Lazarus, P. J., Jimerson, S. R., & Brock, S. E. In S. E. Brock, P. J. Lazarus, & S. R. Jimerson (Eds.), Best Practices in School Crisis Prevention and Intervention, 2002, Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists; and from other crisis information posted on the NASP website at [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org).*

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