

Handout: Parent Tips for Helping School-Age Children after Disasters

Reactions	Responses	Examples of things to do and say
<p>Confusion about what happened</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Give clear explanations of what happened whenever your child asks. Avoid details that would scare your child. Correct any information that your child is unclear or confused about regarding if there is a present danger. ▶ Remind children that there are people working to keep families safe and that your family can get more help if needed. ▶ Let your children know what they can expect to happen next. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ “I know other kids said that more hurricanes are coming, but we are now in a place that is safer from hurricanes.” ▶ Continue to answer questions your children have (without getting irritable) and to reassure them the family is safe. ▶ Tell them what’s happening, especially about issues regarding school and where they will be living.
<p>Feelings of being responsible: School-age children may have concerns that they were somehow at fault, or should have been able to change what happened. They may hesitate to voice their concerns in front of others.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Provide opportunities for children to voice their concerns to you. ▶ Offer reassurance and tell them why it was not their fault. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Take your child aside. Explain that, “After a disaster like this, lots of kids—and parents too—keep thinking ‘What could I have done differently?’ or ‘I should have been able to do something.’ That doesn’t mean they were at fault.” ▶ “Remember? The firefighter said no one could save Pepper and it wasn’t your fault.”
<p>Fears of recurrence of the event and reactions to reminders</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Help child to identify reminders (people, places, sounds, smells, feelings, time of day) and to clarify the difference between the event and the reminders that occur after it. ▶ Reassure them, as often as they need, that they are safe. ▶ Protect children from seeing media coverage of the event as it can trigger fears of the disaster happening again. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ When they recognize that they are being reminded, say, “Try to think to yourself, ‘I am upset because I am being reminded of the hurricane because it is raining, but now there is no hurricane and I am safe.’” ▶ “I think we need to take a break from the TV right now.”

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Retelling the event or playing out the event over and over	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Permit the child to talk and act out these reactions. Let them know that this is normal. ▶ Encourage positive problem-solving in play or drawing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ “I notice you’re drawing a lot of pictures of what happened. Did you know that many children do that?” ▶ “It might help to draw about how you would like your school to be rebuilt to make it safer.”
Fear of being overwhelmed by their feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Provide a safe place for them to express their fears, anger, sadness, etc. Allow children to cry or be sad; don’t expect them to be brave or tough. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ “When scary things happen, people have strong feelings, like being mad at everyone or being very sad. Would you like to sit here with a blanket until you’re feeling better?”
Sleep problems , including bad dreams, fear of sleeping alone, demanding to sleep with parents.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Let your child tell you about the bad dream. Explain that bad dreams are normal and they will go away. Do not ask the child to go into too many details of the bad dream. ▶ Temporary sleeping arrangements are okay; make a plan with your child to return to normal sleeping habits. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ “That was a scary dream. Let’s think about some good things you can dream about and I’ll rub your back until you fall asleep.” ▶ “You can stay in our bedroom for the next couple of nights. Then we will spend more time with you in your bed before you go to sleep. If you get scared again, we can talk about it.”
Concerns about the safety of themselves and others.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Help them to share their worries and give them realistic information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Create a “worry box” where children can write out their worries and place them in the box. Set a time to look these over, problem-solve, and come up with answers to the worries.
Altered behavior: Unusually aggressive or restless behavior.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Encourage the child to engage in recreational activities and exercise as an outlet for feelings and frustration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ “I know you didn’t mean to slam that door. It must be hard to feel so angry.” ▶ “How about if we take a walk? Sometimes getting our bodies moving helps with strong feelings.”

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<p>Somatic complaints: Headaches, stomachaches, muscle aches for which there seem to be no reason.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Find out if there is a medical reason. If not, provide comfort and assurance that this is normal. ▶ Be matter-of-fact with your child; giving these non-medical complaints too much attention may increase them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Make sure the child gets enough sleep, eats well, drinks plenty of water, and gets enough exercise. ▶ “How about sitting over there? When you feel better, let me know and we can play cards.”
<p>Closely watching a parent’s responses and recovery: not wanting to disturb parent with their own worries.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Give children opportunities to talk about their feelings as well as your own. ▶ Remain as calm as you can, so as not to increase your child’s worries. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ “Yes, my ankle is broken, but it feels better since the paramedics wrapped it. I bet it was scary seeing me hurt, wasn’t it?”
<p>Concern for other victims and families.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Encourage constructive activities on behalf of others, but do not burden with undo responsibility. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Help children identify projects that are age-appropriate and meaningful (e.g., clearing rubble from school grounds, collecting money or supplies for those in need).