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Helping Children After a Natural Disaster: Information for Parents and Teachers

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Natural disasters can be especially traumatic for children and youth. Experiencing a dangerous or violent flood, storm, or earthquake is frightening even for adults, and the devastation to the familiar environment (i.e., home and community) can be long lasting and distressing. Often an entire community is impacted, further undermining a child's sense of security and normalcy. These factors present a variety of unique issues and coping challenges, including issues associated with specific types of natural disasters, the need to relocate when home and/or community have been destroyed, the role of the family in lessening or exacerbating the trauma, emotional reactions, and coping techniques.

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. Immediate response efforts should emphasize teaching effective coping strategies, fostering supportive relationships, and helping children understand their reactions.

Schools can help play an important role in this process by providing a stable and familiar environment. Through the support of caring adults school personnel can help children return to normal activities and routines (to the extent possible), and provide an opportunity to transform a frightening event into a learning experience.

Issues Associated With Specific Disasters

Hurricanes. Usually hurricanes are predicted days to weeks in advance, giving communities time to prepare. These predictions give families time to gather supplies and prepare. At the same time, however, these activities may generate fear and anxiety. Although communities can be made aware of potential danger, there is always uncertainty about the exact location of where the hurricane will impact. When a hurricane strikes, victims experience intense thunder, rain, lightning, and wind. Consequently, startle reactions to sounds may be acute in the months that follow. Among a few children subsequent storms may trigger panic reactions. Immediate reactions to hurricanes can include emotional and physical exhaustion. In some instances children may experience survivor guilt (e.g., that they were not harmed, while others were injured or killed).

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. Unlike other natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes and certain types of floods), earthquakes occur with virtually no warning. This fact limits the ability of disaster victims to make the psychological adjustments that can facilitate coping. This relative lack of predictability also significantly lessens feelings of control. While one can climb to higher ground during a flood, or install storm shutters before a hurricane, there is usually no advance warning or immediate preparation with earthquakes. Survivors may have to cope with reminders of the destruction (e.g., sounds of explosions, and the rumbling of aftershocks; smells of toxic fumes and smoke; and tastes of soot, rubber, and smoke).

Tornadoes. Like earthquakes, tornadoes can bring mass destruction in a matter of minutes, and individuals typically have little time to prepare. Confusion and frustration often follow. Similar to a hurricane, people experience sensations during tornadoes that may generate coping challenges. It can be difficult to cope with the sights and smells of destruction. Given the capricious nature of tornadoes, 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. These events are one of the most common natural disasters. Flash floods are the most dangerous as they occur without warning; move at intense speeds; and can tear out trees, destroy roads and bridges, and wreck buildings. In cases of dam failure the water can be especially destructive. Sensations that may generate coping challenges include desolation of the landscape, the smell of sludge and sodden property, coldness and wetness, and vast amounts of mud. Most floods do not recede overnight, and many residents have to wait days or weeks before they can begin the cleanup.

Recovery Can Take Time

Although the natural disasters may only last a short period, survivors can be involved with the disaster aftermath for months or even years. Collaboration between the school crisis response team and an assortment of community, state, and federal organizations and agencies is necessary to respond to the many needs of children, families, and communities following a natural disaster. Families are often required to deal with multiple people and agencies (e.g., insurance adjustors, contractors, electricians, roofers, the Red Cross, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the Salvation Army). Healing in the aftermath of a natural disaster takes time; however, advanced preparation and immediate response will facilitate subsequent coping and healing.

Possible Reactions of Children and Youth to Natural Disasters

The severity of children's reactions will depend on their specific risk factors. 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. Adults should contact a professional if children exhibit significant changes in behavior or any of the following symptoms over an extended period of time.

- **Preschoolers**—thumb sucking, bedwetting, clinging to parents, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, fear of the dark, regression in behavior, and withdrawal from friends and routines.
- **Elementary School Children**—irritability, aggressiveness, clinginess, nightmares, school avoidance, poor concentration, and withdrawal from activities and friends.
- **Adolescents**—sleeping and eating disturbances, agitation, increase in conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behavior, and poor concentration.

A minority of children may be at risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Symptoms can include those listed above as well as re-experiencing the disaster during play and/or dreams; anticipating or feeling that the disaster is happening again; avoiding reminders of the disaster; general numbness to emotional topics; and increased arousal symptoms such as inability to concentrate and startle reactions. Although rare, some adolescents may also be at increased risk of suicide if they suffer from serious mental health problems like PTSD or depression. Again, adults should seek professional mental health help for children exhibiting these symptoms.

Immediately Following a Natural Disaster: Information for Parents and Teachers

Remain calm and reassuring. Children take their cues from you, especially young children. Acknowledge the loss or destruction, but emphasize the community’s efforts to cleanup and rebuild. To the extent it is possible to do so, assure them that family and friends will take care of them and that life will return to normal.

Acknowledge and normalize their feelings. Allow children to discuss their feelings and concerns, and address any questions they may have regarding the event. Listen and empathize. An empathetic listener is very important. Let them know that their reactions are normal and expected.

Encourage children to talk about disaster-related events. Children need an opportunity to discuss their experiences in a safe, accepting environment. Provide activities that enable children to discuss their experiences. This may include a range of methods (both verbal and nonverbal) and incorporate varying projects (e.g., drawing, stories, music, drama, audio and video recording). Seek the help of the school psychologist, counselor, or social worker if you need help with ideas or managing the conversation.

Promote positive coping and problem-solving skills. Activities should teach children how to apply problem-solving skills to disaster-related stressors. Encourage children to develop realistic and positive methods of coping that increase their ability to manage their anxiety and to identify which strategies fit with each situation.

Emphasize children’s resiliency. Focus on their competencies. Help children identify what they have done in the past that helped them cope when they were frightened or upset. Bring their attention to other communities that have experienced natural disasters and recovered (e.g., Miami, FL and Charleston, SC).

Strengthen children’s friendship and peer support. Children with strong emotional support from others are better able to cope with adversity. Children’s relationships with peers can provide suggestions for how to cope and can help decrease isolation. In many disaster situations, friendships may be disrupted because of family relocations. In some cases, parents may be less available to provide support to their children because of their own distress and feelings of being overwhelmed.

Activities such as asking children to work cooperatively in small groups can help children strengthen supportive relationships with their peers.

Take care of your own needs. Take time for yourself and try to deal with your own reactions to the situation as fully as possible. You will be better able to help your children if you are coping well. If you are anxious or upset, your children are more likely to feel the same way. Talk to other adults such as family, friends, faith leaders, or counselors. It is important not to dwell on your fears or anxiety by yourself. Sharing feelings with others often makes people feel more connected and secure. Take care of your physical health. Make time, however small, to do things you enjoy. **Avoid using drugs or alcohol to feel better.**

Immediately Following a Natural Disaster: Specific Information for Schools

Identify children and youth who are high risk and plan interventions. Risk factors are outlined in the above section on children's reactions. Interventions may include classroom discussions, individual counseling, small group counseling, or family therapy. From classroom discussions, and by maintaining close contact with teachers and parents, the school crisis response team can help determine which students need counseling services. A mechanism also needs to be in place for self-referral and parent-referral of students.

Provide time for students to discuss the disaster. Depending on the situation, teachers may be able to guide this discussion in class, or students can meet with the school psychologist or other mental health professional for a group crisis intervention. Classroom discussions help children to make some sense of the disaster. They also encourage students to develop effective means of coping, discover that their classmates share similar questions, and develop peer support networks. **Teachers should not be expected to conduct such discussions if children are severely impacted or if they themselves are distressed.**

Allow time for staff to discuss their feelings and share their experiences. Members of your crisis team should also have the opportunity to receive support from a trained mental health professional. Providing crisis intervention is emotionally draining and caregivers will need an opportunity to process their crisis response. This could include teachers and other school staff if they have been serving as crisis caregivers for students.

Secure additional mental health support. Although many caregivers are often willing to provide support during the immediate aftermath of a natural disaster, long-term services may be lacking. School mental health professionals can help provide and coordinate mental health services, but it is important to connect with community resources as well in order to provide such long-term assistance. Ideally these relationships would be established in advance.

Helping Children Adjust to Relocation After a Natural Disaster

The frequent need to relocate after a disaster creates unique coping challenges. It may contribute to the social, environmental, and psychological stress experienced by children and their families. Children will be most impacted by the reactions of their parents and other family members, the duration of the relocation, their natural coping style and emotional reactivity, and their ability to

stay connected with friends and other familiar people and activities. To the extent possible parents and other caregivers should:

- Provide opportunities for children to see friends.
- Bring personal items that the child values when staying in temporary housing.
- Establish some daily routines so that the child is able to have a sense of what to expect (including returning to school as soon as possible).
- Provide opportunities for children to share their ideas and listen carefully to their concerns or fears.
- Be sensitive to the disruption that relocation may cause and be responsive to the child's needs.
- Consider the developmental level and unique experiences of each child; it is important to remember that as children vary, so will their responses to the disruption of relocation,

In addition, school personnel should:

- Determine the status of every child in the school. Contact each child who is absent and keep a record. Identify the needs of children whose home was destroyed or damaged.
- Find out the phone numbers and addresses of every student that had to relocate. Encourage classmates to write notes or make phone calls.
- Develop an advisory committee of students to report back to school staff about what resources and changes in routines will help students cope.
- Listen to and observe students' behavior. It takes time for children to understand and adjust to disasters. It is perfectly normal for them to discuss the event over and over again. Provide opportunities for children to discuss how they are coping. Use creative arts (e.g., drama, art, music, photography) to help them express their emotions.
- Help connect families to community resources. Bring agencies into the school that can deal with needs related to housing, finances, and insurance. Ensure that children get any necessary medical and emotional assistance.
- Increase staffing for before and after school care. If possible, extend the service for additional hours and even on weekends.
- Incorporate information about the disaster into related subject areas, as appropriate. Science, math, history, and language arts are especially relevant.

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

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