

# Emergency Preparedness: Children

## Introduction

**Children and Disasters:** Disasters can leave children feeling frightened, confused and insecure. Children may respond to disaster by demonstrating fears, sadness or behavioral problems. Younger children may return to earlier behavior patterns, such as bedwetting, sleep problems and separation anxiety. Older children also may display anger, aggression, school problems or withdrawal. Some children who have only indirect contact with the disaster but witness it on television also may develop distress. Whether a child has personally experienced trauma, has merely seen the event on TV or has heard it discussed by adults, parents and teachers should be informed and ready to help if reactions to stress begin to occur.

**Coping with Disaster:** The way children cope with disasters or emergencies often is directly tied to the way their parents cope. Children can detect adults' fears and sadness. Parents and adults can make disasters less traumatic for children by taking steps to manage their own feelings and coping. Parents almost always are the best source of support for children in disasters. One way to establish a sense of control and to build confidence in children before a disaster is to involve them in preparing family disaster kits and plans.

Children's reactions are influenced by the behavior, thoughts and feelings of adults. Adults should:

- Ask children and adolescents to share their thoughts and feelings about the incident.
- Clarify misunderstandings about risk and danger by listening to their concerns and answering questions.
- Maintain a sense of calm by validating children's concerns and perceptions and with discussion of concrete plans for safety.
- Listen to what children are saying.

- Understand that some children may have difficulty expressing feelings. Allow the child to draw a picture or tell a story about what happened.

Try to understand what is causing children's anxieties and fears. Children typically are most afraid that:

- The event will happen again.
- Someone close to them will be injured or killed.
- They will be left alone or separated from the family.

### **After a Disaster: Reassuring Children**

Help reassure children after an emergency or disaster:

- Reassure with personal contact. Hug and touch your children.
- Calmly provide facts about the disaster and current plans for ensuring their safety, along with recovery plans.
- Encourage your children to talk about their feelings.
- Spend extra time with your children, such as at bedtime.
- Re-establish your daily routine for work, school, play, meals and rest.
- Give your children specific chores to help them feel they are helping restore family and community life.
- Praise and recognize responsible behavior.
- Understand that your children will have a range of reactions to disasters.
- Encourage your children to help update your family disaster plan.

If you have tried to create a reassuring environment but your children continue to exhibit stress, if the reactions worsen over time, or if they cause interference with daily behavior at school, at home or with other relationships, talk to a professional. You can get professional help from the children's primary care physician, a mental health provider specializing in children's needs or a member of the clergy.

### **Be Prepared: Develop Family Emergency Plans and Create Emergency Supply Kits**

**Develop Family Emergency Plans:** Early planning will save lives, fear and panic. Keep written plans, and share your plan with friends or family. Talk with your children about an emergency plan. This plan should include evacuation routes and meeting places.

**Create a Family Emergency Supply Kit:** Build supply kits for all family members and pets for at least three days, making certain that the kits are portable in case of evacuation. Family kits should include:

- Food and water
- Medicines, first-aid kit, copies of prescriptions, toiletries
- Important documents, personal identification, copies of insurance
- Cash or travelers checks
- Other essential supplies that your family may need: flashlights, extra batteries, blankets, seasonal clothing, a battery-operated or crank radio, a weather radio, cell phones and chargers

**Create a Child Emergency Supply Kit:** Build supply kits for each of your children to add comfort and reassurance in a time of stress and anxiety. Each kit should have three days of supplies and be portable in case of evacuation. Make sure your children know where their kits are kept. Include in your children's kits:

- Extra clothes and shoes (keep a sturdy pair upside down under the bed)
- Mittens, scarf, jacket
- Best-friend buddy, such as a stuffed animal
- Books and games
- Comfort food, hard candy, crackers, granola bars, dried fruit

- Paper with home address, parents' names and phone numbers, other emergency contact numbers
- Current photos of the child and family
- Money (coins and small bills, about \$20 worth)
- Toothbrush, toothpaste, comb, brush, other toiletries
- Small first-aid kit
- Light blanket

## **Information Sources:**

[www.eden.lsu.edu](http://www.eden.lsu.edu); [www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov); [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov); [www.spc.noaa.gov](http://www.spc.noaa.gov); [www.nssl.noaa.gov](http://www.nssl.noaa.gov); [www.red-cross.org](http://www.red-cross.org); <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/disaster/factsheets/index.html>

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2020

VCE-411NP