



DISASTER RECOVERY SERIES

TIMELY INFORMATION

Coping With Stress

During Times of Stress: Strategies for Parents and Teachers Adapted From North Carolina Cooperative Extension System

During disasters, many families suffer from the onset of sudden stress. Severe stress can disrupt functioning. Overtime, relief from stress enables families to eventually reestablish equilibrium. Informed intervention can speed up this process and in many instances can prevent serious problems later.

On the other hand, families that were dysfunctional (prior to the disaster), will not be cured through intervention. The most vulnerable and those with the lowest resources were most susceptible before the disaster and remained so after the disaster.

A theory worthy of consideration in dealing with disaster stress is attachment theory. Throughout life, young children are more resilient if they have become attached to at least one significant adult. Being able to trust at least one adult pulls them through stressful times. Secure attachment provides a foundation for healthy development and healthy mental functioning.

Although attachment exists all of the time, it is particularly evident when a child is ill, tired, or afraid. A child searches out that person who makes them feel safe and secure. Stress occurs when that person is not available...in proximity or emotionally.

Separation is the flip side of attachment. Any indication that separation may occur causes stress. Children going into a new child care situation, to a new class, or to spend the night away from home (even to camp), can be stressed due to separation. Children can bring an attachment item along (blanket, bear) to child care, to ease the separation from parents.

The more severe the disaster, the more serious the threat and the greater the chance for actual separation or loss. Sleeping alone in a strange place, being separated from parents and other family members, losing toys and pets are ways children were affected during the disaster.

Parent should be assured that they are not spoiling their child by responding to fright. If feelings are not recognized, then buried and later may surface...when the reason is not as evident. Significant adult availability and responsiveness is of great importance to move through the stressful time.

Helping Children Handle Disaster-Related Anxiety

Pre-School Age Children

Behavior such as bedwetting, thumb sucking, baby talk, or a fear of sleeping alone may intensify in some younger children, or reappear in children who had previously outgrown them. They may complain of very real stomach cramps or headaches, and be reluctant to go to school. It's important to remember that these children are not "being bad". They are afraid. Here are some suggestions to help them cope with their fears:

Reassure pre-schoolers that they're safe. Provide extra comfort and contact by discussing the child's fears at night, by telephoning during the day and with extra physical comforting.

Get a better understanding of a child's feelings about the disaster. Encouraging children to draw pictures about the disaster, and then discussing them, will offer insight into each child's particular fears and concerns. You can work to structure children's play so that it remains constructive, serving as an outlet for expressing fear or anger.

School Age Children

Children this age may ask many questions about the disaster, and it's important that you try to answer them in clear and simple language. If a child is concerned about a parent who is distressed, don't tell a child not to worry doing so will just make him or her worry more.

Here are several important points to remember with grade-school-age children:

False reassurance does not help this age group. Don't say disasters will never affect your family again; children will know this isn't true. Instead say "I'll always try to keep you safe," or "Adults are working very hard to make things safer for next time." Children's fears often get worse around bed time, so you might want to stick around until the child falls asleep in order to make him or her feel protected.

Monitor children's media viewing. Images of the disaster and the damage are extremely frightening to children, so consider limiting the amount of media coverage they see. A good way to do this without calling attention to your own concern is to regularly schedule an activity - story reading, drawing, movies, or letter writing, for example during the news hour.

Allow them to express themselves through play or drawing. As with younger children, school-age children sometimes find comfort in expressing themselves through playing games or drawing scenes of the disaster. Allowing them to do so, and then talking about it gives you the story they have expressed in pictures with an emphasis on personal safety.

Don't be afraid to say "I don't know." Part of keeping discussion of the disaster open and honest is not being afraid to say you don't know how to answer a child's question. When such an occasion arises, explain to your child that disasters are very unpredictable, and they cause things that even adults have trouble dealing with. Temper this by explaining that, even so, adults will always work very hard to keep children safe and secure.

Adolescents

Encourage youth to work out their concerns about the disaster. Adolescents may try to downplay their worries. It is generally a good idea to talk about these issues, keeping the lines of communication open and remaining honest about the financial, physical and emotional impact of the disaster on your family.

Adolescents typically are going through an identity phase of development. Their sense of "who they are" at this point in their lives may be tied to possessions and friends. Having to transfer schools may be traumatic and telling friends they are living in a shelter equally difficult.

Offer support and encouragement that things will get better and elicit their contribution to work on repairs or prevention of additional damage.

General Guidelines for Parents

Spend more time with your child, using at least part of that time to talk.

Some comfort may be restored through recreating familiar surroundings (i.e. obtaining copies of photos from family and friends and allowing the child to replace stuffed animals).

Children can be expected to have greater difficulty with times of separation (school drop-offs, bedtime) so extra reassurance is important. Let your child know where you are. Daytime phone calls may be increased.

Monitor your child's viewing of the disaster on television and other media. Repeated viewing is traumatic. If possible, watch television with your child.

Allow the child to discuss the disaster, but do not force it. When discussing it, emphasize that the child is now safe.

General Guidelines for Teachers

Greet each child warmly each day. That transition from parent to teacher is an important one. Often mornings are extremely stressful for families. Children may have been yelled at, hurried, and given breakfast in the car. A warm smile or hug as a child walks in the door can go a long way to help a child feel accepted and wanted.

Spend time with each child every day. Even if it's just for one or two minutes, get down on the child's level, make eye contact, listen, and watch.

Value each child. Children learn to value themselves through the eyes (and words) of others. What you say (or don't say) to a child has tremendous impact.

Eliminate stressful situations from your classroom and routines. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Is my room arrangement simple and easy to move through?
- Are activity areas clearly defined (e.g., art area, block area, reading/quiet area)?
- Do I have a balance of noisy areas (e.g., blocks, dramatic play), and quiet areas (books, manipulatives)?
- Have I planned my day so that it alternates between active and quiet activities, organized projects and free play?
- Do I stick to routine as much as possible so that children know what to expect each day?

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Previous guidelines prepared by Extension Specialists at Iowa State University.

Parent and Teachers can Assist Children

In a calm, supportive manner talk honestly about the facts of the disaster. Falsely minimizing the disaster will not end the children's concerns.

Encourage children to share their feelings and discuss their experiences.

Methods for Helping Children Cope in School:

Story-telling. Oral or written story-telling are among the methods that can be used to help children reenact their experiences in a constructive manner. Encouraging group discussion after each child relates his/her story allows the children to assist each other.

Arts projects. Encouraging children to draw what they have felt, wished or dreamed after a disaster allows them to express their feelings. Like story-telling, the drawings can be shared during a period of group discussion. Non-verbal activities promote the sharing of feelings and the beginning of grieving.

Group projects. In a discussion led by their teacher, children can discuss what they could do to assist with the recovery efforts. Examples include gathering books and toys for the relief effort or working together on a clean-up project, especially in schools that have been seriously affected.

During the disaster and during recovery, there are many concerns about child care. Where are children safe? Who can watch them while parents are busy in "fighting the disaster" or assisting with a clean-up?

Some possibilities are churches, clergy/members, child care facilities, relatives, some high school students or elderly in community. Check for after school or summer school activities this would give the child a meaningful place to be and would free your time for dealing with the crisis. Other ideas include: Library programs; foster grandparents agencies; 4-H Club; church youth groups; child care centers.

Classroom Activities

Many teachers respond to disasters with creative classroom activities to assist their students in ventilating and integrating their experiences. Some of these activities are appropriate for various age groups. They are meant to be vehicles for expression and discussion for your students, important steps in the healing process. These are examples of what can be done. They can be used to stimulate your own ideas and can be adapted to meet your own students' needs and your teaching style.

Preschool Activities

1. Availability of toys that encourage play reenactment of children's experiences and observations during the disaster can help children integrate these experiences. These might include fire trucks, dump trucks, rescue trucks, ambulances, building blocks or playing with puppets or dolls as ways for the child to ventilate and act out his or her own feelings about what has occurred.
2. Children need close physical contact during times of stress to help them reestablish ego boundaries and a sense of security. Games that involve physical touching among children within a structure are helpful in this regard. Some examples might be:
 - a. Ring Around the Rosie
 - b. London Bridge
 - c. Duck, Duck, Goose

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3. Providing extra amounts of finger foods, in small portions, and fluids is a concrete way of supplying the emotional and physical nourishment children need in times of stress. Oral satisfaction is especially necessary as children tend to revert to more regressive behavior in response to feeling that their survival or security is threatened.
4. Have the children do a mural on long paper with topics such as what happened in your house (school or neighborhood) when the big storm hit (earthquake, etc.). This is recommended for small groups with discussion afterward facilitated by an adult.
5. "Short stories" dictated to an adult on a one-to-one basis on such topics as "What I do and don't like about the rain." This activity can help the child verbalize his/her fears, as well as to perhaps get back in touch with previous positive associations with the disruptive phenomena.
6. Have the children draw pictures about the disaster and then discuss the pictures in small groups. This activity allows them to vent their experiences and to discover that others share their fears.
7. Do a group collage.

Primary School Activities

1. For the younger children, availability of toys that encourage expressive play reenactment of their experiences and observations during the disaster can be helpful in their integrating these experiences. These might include ambulances, dump trucks, fire trucks, building blocks, and dolls. Playing with puppets can provide ways for the older children, as well, to ventilate their feelings.
2. Help or encourage the children to develop skits or puppet shows about what happened in the disaster. Encourage them to include anything positive about the experience as well as those aspects that were frightening or disconcerting.
3. Stimulate group discussion about disaster experiences by showing your own feelings, fears or experiences during the disaster. It is very important to legitimize their feelings and to help them feel less isolated.
4. Have the children brainstorm on their own classroom or family disaster plan. What would they do? What would they take if they had to evacuate? How would they contact parents? How should the family be prepared? How could they help the family? Encourage them to discuss these things with their families.
5. Encourage class activities in which children can organize or build projects (scrapbooks, replicas, etc.), thus giving them a sense of mastery and control over events.
6. Have the children color the pictures in "The Awful Rain and How It Made Me Feel" (or similar material appropriate to the disaster). Encourage the children to talk about their own feelings during and after the disaster.

Junior High and High School Activities

1. Group discussion of their experiences of the disaster is particularly important among adolescents. They need the opportunity to vent as well as to normalize the extreme emotions that come up for them. A good way to stimulate such a discussion is for the teacher to share his/her own reactions to the disaster. They may need considerable reassurance that even extreme emotions and "crazy thoughts" are normal in a disaster. It is important to end such discussions on a positive note (e.g., What heroic acts were observed? How can we be of help at home or in the community? How could we be more prepared for a disaster?). Such discussion is appropriate for any course of study in that it can facilitate a return to more normal functioning.

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2. Break the class into small groups and have them develop a disaster plan for their home, school or community. This can be helpful in repairing a sense of mastery and security, as well as having practical merit. The small groups might then share their plans in a discussion with the entire class. Encourage students to share their plans with their families. They may wish to conduct a "Family Disaster Preparedness" meeting and invite family members and disaster preparedness experts to participate.
3. Conduct a class discussion and/or support a class project on how the students might help the community rehabilitation effort. It is important to help them develop concrete and realistic ways to be of assistance. This helps them to overcome the feelings of helplessness, frustration, and "survivors guilt" that are common in disaster situations.
4. Classroom activities that relate the disaster to course study can be a good way to help the students integrate their own experience or observations while providing specific learning experiences. In implementing the following suggestions ,or similar ideas of your own, it is very important to allow time for the students to discuss feelings that are stimulated by the projects or issues covered.

Journalism--Have the students write stories that cover different aspects of the disaster. These might include community impact, lawsuits that result from the disaster, human interest stories from fellow students, geological impact, etc. Issues such as accurate reporting of catastrophic events as sensationalism might be discussed. The stories might be compiled into a special student publication.

Science--Cover scientific aspects of the disaster, e.g., discuss climate condition, geological impact, etc. Project about stress: physiological responses to stress and methods of dealing with it. Discuss how flocks of birds, herds of animals, etc., band together and work in a threatening or emergency situation. What can be learned from their instinctive actions?

English composition--Have the students write about their own experiences in the disaster. Such issues as the problems that arise in conveying heavy emotional tone without being overly dramatic might be discussed.

Literature--Have students report on natural disaster in Greek mythology, American and British literature, in poetry.

Psychology--Have the students apply what they have learned in the course to the emotions, behaviors, and stress reactions they felt or observed in the disaster. Cover post-traumatic stress syndrome. Have a guest speaker from the mental health professions involved in disaster work with victims, etc. Have students discuss (from their own experience) what things have been most helpful in dealing with disaster-related stress. Have students develop a mental health education brochure discussing emotional/behavioral reactions to disaster and things that are helpful in coping with disaster-related stress. Have students conduct a survey among their parents or friends: What was the most dangerous situation in which you ever found yourself? How did you react psychologically?

Peer counseling--Provide special information on common responses to disaster; encourage the students' helping each other integrate their own experiences.

Health--discuss emotional reactions to disaster, the importance of taking care of one's own emotional and physical well-being, etc. Discuss health implications of the disaster, e.g., water contamination, food that may have gone bad due to lack of refrigeration, and other health precautions and safety measures. Discuss the effects of adrenalin on the body during stress and danger. A guest speaker from Public Health and/or Mental Health might be invited to the class.

Art--Have the students portray their experiences of the disaster in various art media. This may be done individually or as a group effort (e.g., making a mural).

Speech/Drama--Have the students portray the catastrophic emotions that come up in response to a disaster. Have them develop a skit or play on some aspects of the event. Conduct a debate: Women are more psychologically prepared to handle stress than men (or vice-versa).

Math--Have the class solve mathematical problems related to the impact of the disaster (e.g., build questions around gallons of water lost, cubic feet of earth that moved in a mud slide).

History--Have students report on natural disasters that have occurred in your community or geographic area and what lessons were learned that can be useful in preparing for future disasters.

Civics/Government--Study governmental agencies responsible for aid to victims, how they work, how effective they are, the political implications within a community. Examine the community systems and how the stress of the disaster has affected them. Have students invite a local governmental official to class to discuss disaster precautions, warning systems, etc. Have students contact the California Seismic Safety Commission of State legislators regarding recent disaster-related bills passed or pending. How will this legislation affect your community and other areas of the state? Visit local emergency operating centers and learn about their functions.

[Adapted from North Carolina Cooperative Extension System by Chuck Hill, Extension Specialist-4-H and Development]