



## After a Disaster: A Guide for Parents and Teachers

---

Natural disasters such as hurricanes and tornados, or man-made tragedies such as bombings, can leave children feeling frightened, confused and insecure.

Whether a child has personally experienced trauma, has seen an event on television, or heard it talked about by adults, it is important for parents and teachers to be informed and ready to help if their child begins to react to stress.

Children respond to trauma in many different ways. Some may have reactions very soon after the event happens; others may seem to be doing fine for weeks or months, then begin to behave in ways that make you worry. Knowing the signs that are common at different ages can help parents and teachers to recognize problems and respond in the right way.

### Preschool Age

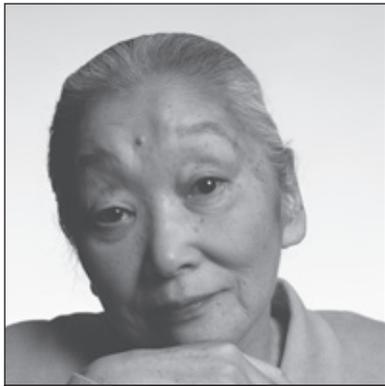
Children from 1-5 years old find it harder to deal with change and loss than older children. Also, children in this age group have not had the chance to develop their coping skills, so they have to depend on parents, family members and teachers to help them through hard times.

Very young children may go back to behaviors that they had already outgrown after a traumatic event happens. For example, preschoolers may begin to suck their thumbs or wet the bed again. They may become afraid of strangers, animals, the dark or "monsters." They may cling to a parent or teacher or become very attached to a place where they feel safe.

Changes in eating and sleeping habits are common, as are unexplainable aches and pains. Other symptoms to watch for are disobedience, acting overly hyper, troubles with speech and aggressive or shy behavior. Preschoolers may tell untrue or overdone stories about the event, or they may talk about it over and over again.

### Early Childhood

Children ages 5-11 may have some of the same reactions as preschool age children. They also may keep apart from play groups and friends, fight more for the attention of parents, become afraid of going to school, start getting worse grades, become aggressive or have trouble concentrating. Children in this age group may also return to more childish behaviors like asking to be fed or dressed.



### **Adolescence**

Children 12-14 are likely to complain about unclear physical problems when under stress, and may stop doing chores, schoolwork and other responsibilities that they were able to take care of before the event. They may either fight for attention from parents or teachers or withdraw, resist authority, start causing trouble at home or in the classroom or even begin to experiment with harmful behaviors such as alcohol or drugs.

Children in this age group are at a stage in which the opinions of others are very important. They need their friends to think they are “normal” and they care less about having relationships with adults or participating in family activities they used to enjoy.



### **Later Adolescence**

In later adolescence, teens may have feelings of helplessness and guilt after a traumatic event because they cannot take on the same responsibilities as a full adult when their community responds. Older teens may also deny their emotional reactions to the event.

### **How to Help**

Reassurance is the best way to help children through hard times. Very young children need a lot of cuddling and spoken support. Honestly answer questions about the disaster but don't focus on scary details or let talking about the event take over family or classroom time. Encourage children of all ages to share their feelings through talking about the event or other means of expression, or by finding a way to help people who were affected by the disaster.



Try to maintain a normal household or classroom routine and encourage children to take part in recreational activities. For the time being, lower your expectations about how well children do in school and swap easier responsibilities for normal chores.

Finally, accept that you, too, may be having reactions to the traumatic event and take steps to work on your own physical and emotional healing.

### **Where can I find help?**

For additional assistance, contact your local public health department, community mental health center, a counselor or a mental health professional.



The information in this fact sheet was adapted from a publication by the Center for Mental Health Services of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

