



South Carolina Department of Health
and Environmental Control

SOUTH CAROLINA

Tactics
Against
Terrorism

Be Safe. Be Smart.

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CHILDREN:

A South Carolinian's guide to
talking with your children about
disasters.

SOUTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTROL

TACTICS AGAINST TERRORISM: **CHILDREN**

South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control
Office of Public Health Preparedness



This information is intended to be a guide to help you discuss disasters with your children.

It is important to talk with your children about disasters.

Disasters are serious, distressing and real. Whether it is a natural disaster like a hurricane, or man-made events like war or a terrorist attack, these events might take away a child's sense of safety and security. The damage, injuries and deaths that can result from a disaster often are difficult for a child to understand. Your child will look to you for safety and an explanation.

BE SAFE. BE SMART: TALK NOW, TALK OFTEN

The world has been strongly impacted by disasters: hurricanes, earthquakes, war and terrorist attacks. It is important to talk with your children about these events even when they do not directly affect your lives.

Families should discuss the dangers posed to them by disasters. They are capable of hurting us, causing damage, and causing deaths. Children need to understand that during and after a disaster, there will be many people who will try to help—like firemen, policemen, paramedics, and other emergency workers. It is important for them to understand that these people work to help protect us.

Do not wait until something happens to talk with your child. Make these conversations part of your family preparedness plan.

Natural disasters

Talk to you child about different types of natural disasters. Some areas of South Carolina are subject to such natural disasters as earthquakes, floods, forest fires and hurricanes. It is important to discuss these topics if you live in an area where these disasters are more likely to occur.

Man-made disasters

You should also talk about man-made disasters, whether they are intentional or accidental. These disasters include chemical spills, vehicle crashes, war, terrorism and other acts of violence.

Terrorism

Explaining terrorism to your children can be hard to do. What you say depends on the child's age, stage of development and emotional status. Acts of terrorism are bad things. These acts are hard to understand – even for adults.

It is important to say that not all people from a certain group or country are bad. Your child should understand that being afraid of or angry at certain types of people is also inappropriate.

War

Children might be more affected if they have family members or friends involved in a war. Answer their questions truthfully. Explain to your child that people are working together to protect our country and others.

TIPS FOR TALKING ABOUT DISASTERS

When disasters directly affect your family

If a friend or family member has been killed or seriously hurt, or if the child's home, community or school has been damaged, there is a strong chance the child will be affected. The amount of death or damage may determine how much of an effect the disaster has on your child.

Be ready to talk with your child about the situation. The child needs to know that he or she will be safe. After a disaster children are afraid that:

- the event will happen again,
- someone will be injured or killed,
- they will be separated from their family, or
- they will be left alone.

When disasters happen somewhere else

When the event does not directly affect your family, it is still important to assure your children that they are safe. Explain that the news they see on television is happening elsewhere.

Your children will look to you for comfort and an explanation. Children are more vulnerable than adults. They could question if the disaster will happen again and why it happened in the first place.

Answer your child's questions

Let your child know that they can ask you about the disaster. Do not force them to talk about it. Your child might talk about what other children say they heard or saw on the news, instead of discussing their own feelings.

Be honest with your child

While being truthful about the event, keep in mind the age, maturity level and distress level of your child. The amount of details a child needs depends on this. Your child is not an adult, so it is helpful to provide information in simple terms that are easily understood.

Observe your child's behavior

Children express their thoughts and feelings in many different ways. Be aware of any changes in their normal behavior or routines. It is common after an event for children and families to experience these disruptions.

Over the days or weeks after a disaster, your child could act in the following ways:

- Ask questions about overall safety
- Express anger and thoughts of revenge
- Fight with siblings, friends, parents or other adults
- Have nightmares and trouble sleeping
- Begin bedwetting or thumb sucking
- Want to stay close to you
- Become easily scared or difficult to calm down
- Feel "sick," such as stomachaches or headaches
- Act out the event over and over again during playtime
- Seem more quiet or withdrawn
- Cry easily and talk a lot about being scared
- Have trouble paying attention or daydream more than usual

Listen to what they are saying and try to answer their questions. Tell them you understand they are upset and that it is normal to feel this way. Helping your children discuss these feelings should begin to help ease their fears.

Watch or read the news together

As adults, we know that news coverage does not always tell the whole story. Seeing the same scenes of a disaster over and over again can traumatize your child and be scary and confusing. Children might not realize it has already happened, and that it is not happening over and over again.

It is important to monitor and limit your child's exposure to the news, especially if they are pre-school age or younger. If your child is already in school and interested in watching the news, watch with them, then talk about what you have seen.

TALKING WITH CHILDREN OF DIFFERENT AGES

Adults have different worries and concerns than children. How children express their fears and concerns depends on many factors. Listening to children's questions and observing their behavior can tell us what they are most worried about.

Infants (birth to 1 year)

Infants depend solely on their parents and caregivers. They sense your emotions and react to them.

Infants often respond to disasters by being fussy, not sleeping or not eating. You can help your infant by remaining calm and maintaining an ordinary routine.

Toddlers (1 to 3 years)

Like infants, toddlers respond to a situation depending on how you act. If you are calm, your toddler will feel secure.

You can help your toddler by remaining calm and maintaining a normal schedule. It is also important to monitor your child's exposure to television. Graphic news images can scare a toddler.

Preschool children (4 to 5 years)

During an overwhelming event, preschool-age children can feel helpless, powerless and scared. Listening to what your child says and seeing how they act will tell you how your child is doing.

You can help your child by staying calm and continuing the family's routines. By knowing what your child is worried about, you can answer their questions, correct misunderstandings and reassure them they are safe. Limit the amount of television your child watches and monitor what they watch.

School-age children (6 to 11 years)

School-age children are more independent and understand that loss from a disaster can be permanent. They might talk about the details of the disaster.

Children at this age might want to stay close to their parents. They might not want to go to school or do regular activities. They might have nightmares and have trouble sleeping. Eating habits could change.

It is important to pay attention to your child's behavior. Answer your child's questions truthfully and accurately. Ask your child what their friends are saying, and correct any wrong information. As with younger children, limit the amount of news coverage your child watches or hears.

Pre-adolescents and adolescents (11 to 18 years)

Older children can be affected very deeply by disasters. They might not discuss their feelings with you. Check for signs and symptoms that they are not coping well.

Common reactions include being preoccupied with the event, feeling scared because the situation is out of their control, or feeling powerful because they have survived.

These reactions can lead to dangerous and risk-taking behaviors like substance abuse, including cigarettes, alcohol and drugs. They can also experience sleep disturbances, argue with people and experience fatigue.

You can help your adolescent by encouraging them to talk about their feelings. Do not force them to talk. They might feel more comfortable talking with their friends or teachers instead of their parents.

WHEN DISASTER STRIKES: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

What happened?

If your child questions you about what has happened, ask what they know about the event. Find out what they heard or saw on television or heard from their friends at school. What they tell you might not be correct. To help them better understand what has happened, tell your child the truth. Remember that reliving or describing an event can cause disturbing feelings to reoccur.

Why did this happen?

It is okay to explain that you do not know why the event happened, but that you are doing everything you can do to ensure their safety. This might be a good time to explain some of the roles others play in making us safe.

Why didn't someone stop this from happening?

Your child might wonder why someone or something did not stop the disaster from

happening. We, as adults, might ask the same question, and be angry or fearful about the event. Let your child know that it is normal for them to question the reasons and to be upset.

What could I have done?

Your child might ask if they could have done something to stop the disaster from happening. Even though there is nothing your child could have done to stop the event, they could feel helpless and scared. Explain to your child that it is OK to feel scared and wish we could have done something to keep the disaster from happening.

Whose fault is it?

Disasters come in many forms, natural and man-made. Explaining whether someone is at fault can be hard. If the disaster occurs naturally, no one is to blame. We can only explain that it is important to be prepared to do what is necessary to be safe.

Man-made disasters can produce anger and a desire to fight back. We might not know who is to blame. If we do, we could become angry with groups of people who are easy to blame. Explain to your child that it is normal to feel angry, but that we should not blame a whole group for the actions of a few.

Terrorist acts, for example, are done by a small number of people who do not represent a whole group or race. Explain that the United States is a place for all different kinds of people, and that in a time of disaster, we should work together to protect our country.

What is going to happen to me?

It is normal for a child to be very worried about what might happen to them. It is important to make your child feel comfortable about asking questions and showing their feelings. Once your child is assured that they are safe, they will most likely begin to show concern for other people and want to help them, too.

What can I do to help?

Once your child feels safe and understands what is going on, they might want to help the people who have been affected or hurt by the disaster. If the event took place far away, explain that there are people helping those who are affected. There might be things you can do as a family to help, such as sending money, food or other items.

If the disaster occurred close to where you live, there could be ways to help your

neighbors or the community. There might be opportunities to assist in relief efforts as a family. Your primary role, however, is your family's safety.

Questions you might ask yourself

How do I answer my child's questions?

In times of crisis, children need to know that their parents or caregivers will listen to them and keep them safe. Answer their questions with honest, simple responses. Support your child as they seek answers for themselves. Not responding to your child's fears and concerns will not make those concerns go away.

What if our discussion upsets my child?

Talking about the disaster could cause your child to become more upset. Remember, they could still have unresolved issues about the event. If the discussion is making your child more upset than before, it might be best to continue the talk at a later time. Support your child and explain to them it is OK to express their feelings. Otherwise, they might hide them and try to deal with them alone.

What if my child doesn't want to talk about it?

It is best not to force the conversation. Let your child know you are there to discuss their fears and concerns when they want to do so. Some children find it easier to tell you what their friends are saying, instead of what they are feeling themselves.

What if they do not seem upset by the event?

Your child might appear unconcerned about the event. They could even show irritation about news coverage or people talking about it. If your child is acting in this way, look for changes in behavior. Let your child know that they can talk about the event if they want.

How will I know if my child has been affected by the event?

Being upset or scared is a normal reaction to a disaster. However, being scared or worried for a long time after the event can affect their performance in school and relationships with family members. You might need to seek advice from your child's teacher, school counselor, pediatrician, a mental health counselor or member of the clergy.

What if I feel overwhelmed?

After a disaster it is important for you to get the help you need so that you can provide safety and support to your family. If you are overwhelmed or upset get help and support from friends, family members, the clergy or seek professional help.

Many people find that it is helpful to talk with a professional counselor to deal with their feelings following a disaster.

When should I seek professional help?

Getting professional help and support might be best if your child is showing any of the following changes for three months or more after the disaster:

- Behavior and academic problems at school
- Angry outbursts
- Withdrawal from social activities or playing with others
- Nightmares and trouble sleeping
- Physical problems like headaches, weight gain or loss
- Strong anxiety
- Behaviors that are triggered by reminders of the event
- Depression or sense of hopelessness about life or the future
- Alcohol or drug use problems
- Dangerous risk taking behaviors
- Ongoing worry about the event

For more information

Here are some other good sources of information about talking with your children and keeping your family safe in disasters.

S.C. Department of Health & Environmental Control

<http://www.scdhec.gov>

American Academy of Pediatrics

<http://www.aap.org>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<http://www.bt.cdc.gov>

SAMSHA's National Mental Health Information Center

<http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs/EmergencyServices/after.asp>

SAMSHA's State Mental Health Resources for South Carolina

<http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/databases/kdata.aspx?state=SC>

American Red Cross

<http://www.redcross.org>

Red Cross Disaster Preparedness Information

<http://www.prepare.org>

Federal Emergency Management Agency

<http://www.fema.gov> (general)

<http://www.fema.gov/kids> (FEMA for Kids)

S.C. Emergency Management Division

<http://www.scmd.org>

Environmental Protection Agency

<http://www.epa.gov>

U.S. Department of Energy

<http://www.energy.gov>

National Center for Children Exposed to Violence

<http://www.ncccev.org>

Talking With Kids About Tough Issues

<http://www.talkingwithkids.org>

Child-friendly news sources

Your child might be interested in watching and reading news made for them:

- Nickelodeon’s Nick News is available on television and online at <http://www.nick.com>
- The New York Times Learning Network is available at <http://www.nytimes.com/learning>.

This publication provides health information for your general knowledge. Talk to your doctor about your concerns about any medical condition. DHEC does not recommend that you diagnose or treat yourself for a serious illness.







