

Restoring a Sense of Well-Being in Children After a Disaster

Children are often exposed both directly and indirectly to the effects of disasters. While some will live in close proximity to an area or community directly impacted by disaster, many others will learn about it through the media or from their parents or friends. It is important for parents, caregivers, and professionals to answer children's questions and reassure them about their safety.

Communicate effectively with your children.

- Keep your statements simple, factual, clear, and sensitively worded.
- Do not overwhelm children with too much information.
- Children may have ideas or beliefs that are difficult to know unless you ask them what they have heard and what they have questions about.
- Children will get information from other children, adults, and the media. Ask your children what they have heard so they do not misunderstand this information.

If children are anxious or fearful, let them know that you understand and will help them with their feelings.

- Children's distress may be based on a different event. Inquire what their distress is about.
- Distress in such situations is usually transient. If children's distress persists, seek help from a trusted provider such as their pediatrician.
- Some children may react by acting out or becoming very quiet. Talk to your child about what is troubling them. Avoid reprimanding or punishing them for their reactions. Let them know that talking may help.

A common question is "Why do these things happen?" Here are some possible responses:

- "We usually cannot be sure what led a specific individual to act in such a way" or "we do not know for sure how an event will turn out."
- Help children understand that government authorities work hard to identify and stop dangerous events before they happen.

You can increase your child's sense of safety by:

Knowing where they are and their return time.

Having a clear method of communication with your child in both normal (e.g., cell phone) and emergency situations (e.g., designated meeting place if phone doesn't work).

Keeping them away from places or situations that are likely to put them in danger.

Being aware of community changes about risks that might surface.

How do you plan for an emergency?

- Discuss possible emergency situations with your children and plans for responding.
- Talk calmly with them about what they can do if they feel they are in danger.
- Instruct them to call emergency services if they are in danger.
- Tell your children to say something to a trusted adult or authority figure when they see something suspicious.