



## Tornadoes, Hurricanes and Children

The intense anxiety and fear that often follow a disaster can be especially troubling for surviving children, especially if children were victims of the disaster or were separated from their families. Some may regress and demonstrate younger behaviors such as thumb sucking or bed wetting. Children may be more prone to nightmares and fear of sleeping alone. Performance in school may suffer. Other changes in behavior patterns may include throwing tantrums more frequently, or withdrawing and becoming more solitary.

There are several things parents and others who care for children can do to help alleviate the emotional consequences of trauma, including the following:

- Spend more time with children and let them be more dependent on you during the months following the trauma - for example, allowing your child to cling to you more often than usual. Physical affection is very comforting to children who have experienced trauma.
- Provide play experiences to help relieve tension. Younger children in particular may find it easier to share their ideas and feelings about the event through non-verbal activities such as drawing.
- Be available and encourage older children to ask questions they may have, as well as sharing their thoughts and feelings with you and with one another. This helps reduce their confusion and anxiety related to the trauma. Respond to questions in terms they can comprehend. Reassure them repeatedly that you care about them and that you understand their fears and concerns.
- Keep regular schedules for activities such as eating, playing and going to bed to help restore a sense of security and normalcy, even if your family has been relocated to a shelter or other temporary housing.
- Provide safe opportunities for children to help others – helping others offers a sense of control and can help children feel better about themselves.
- Reduce the number of times children see the trauma on the news. Repeatedly watching broadcasts of the disaster can re-traumatize children.

When should children seek professional help?

Many children are able to cope effectively with the emotional and physical demands brought about by a natural disaster by using their own support systems. It is not unusual, however, to find that serious problems persist and continue to interfere with daily living.

With children, continual and aggressive emotional outbursts, serious problems at school, preoccupation with the traumatic event, continued and extreme withdrawal, and other signs of intense anxiety or emotional

difficulties all point to the need for professional assistance. A qualified mental health professional such as a psychologist can help such children and their parents understand and deal with thoughts, feelings and behaviors that result from trauma.

[Click here to take the Post Traumatic Growth Inventory.](#)

Thanks for help from: Rosalind Dorlen, PsyD; Richard A. Heaps, Ph.D., ABPP; Rosemary Schwartzbard, PhD; and Suzan M. Stafford, EdD

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