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State News Desk: (850) 921-0217  
FEMA News Desk: (202) 322-6282

# Fact Sheet

## **Helping Children Cope with Disaster/ Keeping Them Safe in Future**

Children are particularly vulnerable to the stress that follows a disaster. Their symptoms may linger much longer than in adults, according to mental health experts.

Children also react to how adults behave in stressful situations, so it's important for parents and caregivers to look after their own mental health.

Parents and other caregivers should be alert to signs of stress-related problems and learn how to deal with their children's fears and unusual behavior.

Children ages five or younger may cry more, become clingy, have nightmares or show excessive fears, such as fear of the dark, fear of animals or fear of being alone. Their appetites may change. They may speak with difficulty or revert to behaviors such as bed-wetting or thumb-sucking.

Children aged five to 11 may become increasingly irritable, aggressive and competitive with their siblings for parental attention.

Older children and teens may be overly rebellious, have physical problems and sleep disturbances. They may engage in risky behavior such as reckless driving or abuse alcohol and drugs.

Signs of anxiety often result from losses, disrupted family life, and the sense of a hostile world created by a natural disaster. Here are things parents can do to help reduce children's stress:

- Limit TV time. Intense media coverage of disasters can frighten young children and disturb teenagers as well.
- Give each child your undivided attention, even for a few minutes daily. Share experiences. Reaffirm your love. Make plans together.
- Ask children to describe their feelings. Encourage them to talk about the disaster and ask as many questions as they like. Listen to what they say. Assure them that the disaster was an act of nature not caused by them. If possible, include the entire family in the discussion.
- Understand their fears. It is important that parents accept children's anxieties as being real to them. Help them understand the causes of their anxieties and fears. Recognize loss of pets, favorite toys and other personal items.
- Keep children informed on what is happening with simple explanations. With children five years or older, rehearse safety precautions for use in possible future disasters.

- Reassure them. Parents can help children by telling them they are safe. It is useful to restore regular routines, provide play experiences, and make bedtime calm and comfortable.
- Encourage activities with their peers. As with adults, social time with friends is an important part of the recovery process.
- Temporarily lower your expectations of children. Acknowledge that stress from the disaster can manifest itself in many ways over a period of time, and make appropriate allowances.

Contact mental health agencies for additional information and resources.

To prepare for future disaster events:

### **Flood Water Safety**

- Constantly watch your children to prevent playing in or around floodwaters. It doesn't take long and it doesn't take much water for children to drown. In many cases, children who drowned had been out of sight less than five minutes and were in the care of one or both parents at the time.
- Know where the ground is exposed and keep children from playing around drainage ditches, spill ways or storm drains.
- Children playing in contaminated standing water can become sick or be bitten by snakes, rodents and other wildlife.
- Watch for live wires or power sources, as electricity from streetlights and downed power lines may be active. Children who come into contact with these power sources, whether through standing water or direct contact, can be given a deadly shock.

Learn more online at [www.ready.gov/floods](http://www.ready.gov/floods).

### **Power Outage Safety**

- Many people fill their bathtubs and buckets with water to use for drinking or washing. Keep everything in one bathroom and lock it off from toddlers who might climb in and drown.
- Batteries may run out and people may resort to using candles. Make sure to watch small children around them and don't forget to blow out candles when not in use.
- Turn off vehicles. In order to recharge cell phones and other electronics, people may run their cars in order to use car chargers. Be sure children don't climb in the car and shift it into gear.
- If you have a gas/propane-powered generator, never run it inside a home, basement or closed garage.

Learn more online at [www.redcross.org/prepare/disaster/power-outage](http://www.redcross.org/prepare/disaster/power-outage).

### **Useful Links**

- FEMA: [www.ready.gov/coping-with-disaster](http://www.ready.gov/coping-with-disaster) and [www.fema.gov/children-and-disasters](http://www.fema.gov/children-and-disasters)
  - Save the Children: go to [www.savethechildren.org](http://www.savethechildren.org) and search "Tips to Help Kids Cope with Disasters".
  - American Academy of Pediatrics: go to [www.healthychildren.org](http://www.healthychildren.org) and search
    - "Helping your Child Cope"
    - "Talking to Children about Disasters"
    - "How Children of Different Ages Respond to Disasters"

- “How to Prevent Carbon Monoxide Poisoning” and
- “Flash Flood Recovery.”
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network: [www.nctsnet.org](http://www.nctsnet.org).

For more information on Florida’s disaster recovery, visit [fema.gov/disaster/4280](http://fema.gov/disaster/4280), <https://twitter.com/femaregion4>, [facebook.com/FEMA](https://www.facebook.com/FEMA), and [fema.gov/blog](http://fema.gov/blog). For imagery, video, graphics and releases, see [www.fema.gov/hurricane-Matthew](http://www.fema.gov/hurricane-Matthew).

*FEMA’s mission is to support our citizens and first responders to ensure that as a nation we work together to build, sustain, and improve our capability to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate all hazards.*

*Disaster recovery assistance is available without regard to race, color, religion, nationality, sex, age, disability, English proficiency or economic status. If you or someone you know has been discriminated against, call FEMA toll-free at **800-621-3362** (voice, 711) or video relay service (VRS). TTY users can call **800-462-7585**. Multilingual operators are available,(for Spanish press #2).*

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