



10 Ideas to Help Children Cope With Natural Disasters

While hundreds of thousands of children will be directly effected by the devastation of the earthquake in Haiti, children everywhere will experience distress as they hear of people who have suffered and watch displaced people on TV. Parents and other adults can take steps to help children cope with their fears and live with hope.

Here are 10 suggestions.

1. Allow children to express their concerns through art work and play.
2. Pray with children for those affected by the earthquake.
3. Limit the amount of television coverage of the disaster children watch.
4. Give children something concrete to do, for example let children help purchase and assemble health kits, layette, or flood buckets. See <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umcor/getconnected/supplies> for information on how to assemble kits.
5. Develop a family disaster plan for the types of natural disasters that may happen in your area. Role play some possible situations. Knowing that you are prepared will help children cope with fears that they may find themselves separated from family in the event of a disaster.
6. Talk with children about what has happened, helping them to identify their feelings. Ask them what they have heard about the disaster from other children. Sometimes children have heard wildly inaccurate information from their peers that needs to be corrected to alleviate fears that have no basis in reality.
7. Discuss openly with children what your family and church are doing to help those who have been hurt by the disaster.
8. Older children may find it helpful to write about what they are feeling. Suggest keeping a journal on paper or computer.
9. Let children use puppets to express feelings.
10. Do a low-key activity together such as assembling a puzzle, playing a board game, or baking cookies that creates spaces for children to talk. Children often find it easier to talk about important things while their hands are engaged in something else.

Helping Children Understand Natural Disasters

In light of recent world events and events that continue to affect our children here at home, Sesame Street along with the American Red Cross are offering parents, caregivers and other adults, these tips on how to help children understand and cope with the effects of natural disasters.

Encourage children to ask questions

Their questions will help you understand what they already know about the situation and allow you to give child-friendly answers to those specific questions. If a question catches you off guard, take a moment to think about how you want to respond before answering. It's also okay to say, "I don't know." Make it clear that you're open to talking about whatever they bring up.

Give children the facts. Use simple words to explain what has happened. In the case of an earthquake, you can explain that "When there's an earthquake, the ground shakes. It shakes because rocks deep under the ground are moving." Explain that it can be scary for everyone, but that adults do their best to keep children safe.

Respect children's concerns. If children tell you that they are afraid of something, validate their fears. Let them know it's okay to be afraid or concerned.

Offer comfort. Children often take their cues from you; when you react, they react. Try to model a sense of calm. Answer even repeated questions honestly and simply. Reassure children that they are safe with you, and that you love them and will take care of them.

Monitor media use. Avoid having children watch or see repeated images of troubling events, such as a natural disaster and its damage. Younger children might think that the event is happening over and over. Parents or caregivers may also want to limit their exposure to media as one way to reduce their own anxiety.

Children may express feelings through actions rather than words. Watch for ongoing changes in behavior in the aftermath of a natural disaster. Children may exhibit clinginess, over activity, not wanting to participate in routines like going to school, etc.

Empower children by thinking about ways you can help. Put together a lemonade stand or a bake sale in your community or school to donate the proceeds to organizations providing aid to the affected areas. Helping others will not only help children learn about empathy, it also shows that there are people that will be there to help during tough times.



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