



## **Helping Children Handle Disaster-Related Anxiety**

Children sense the anxiety and tension in adults around them. And, like adults, children experience the same feelings of helplessness and lack of control that disaster-related stress can bring about. Unlike adults, however, children have little experience to help them place their current situation into perspective. Each child responds differently to disasters, depending on his or her understanding and maturity, but it's easy to see how an event like this can create a great deal of anxiety in children of all ages because they will interpret the disaster as a personal danger to themselves and those they care about. Whatever the child's age or relationship to the damage caused by disaster, it's important that you be open about the consequences for your family, and that you encourage him or her to talk about it.

### **Quick Tips for Parents**

- Children need comforting and frequent reassurances that they're safe. Make sure they get it.
- Be honest and open about the disaster.
- Encourage children to express their feelings through talking, drawing or playing.
- Try to maintain your daily routines as much as possible.

For more information call the National Mental Health Association 1-800-969-NMHA (6642)

### **Pre-School Age Children**

Behavior such as bed-wetting, thumb sucking, baby talk, or a fear of sleeping alone may intensify in some younger children, or reappear in children who had previously outgrown them. They may complain of very real stomach cramps or headaches and be reluctant to go to school. It's important to remember that these children are not "being bad" --they're afraid. Here are some suggestions to help them cope with their fears:

- **Reassure young children that they're safe.** Provide extra comfort and contact by discussing the child's fears at night, by telephoning during the day and with extra physical comforting.

**Get a better understanding of a child's feelings about the disaster.** Discuss the disaster with them and find out each child's particular fears and concerns. Answer all questions they may ask and provide them loving comfort and care. You can work to structure children's play so that it remains constructive, serving as an outlet for them to express fear or anger.

## **Grade-School Age Children**

Children this age may ask many questions about the disaster, and it's important that you try to answer them in clear and simple language. If a child is concerned about a parent who is distressed, don't tell a child not to worry--doing so will just make him or her worry more. Here are several important things to remember with school-age children:

- False reassurance does not help this age group. Don't say disasters will never affect your family again; children will know this isn't true. Instead, say "You're safe now and I'll always try to protect you, -- or--Adults are working very hard to make things safe." Remind children that disasters are very rare. Children's fears often get worse around bedtime, so you might want to stick around until the child falls asleep in order to make him or her feel protected.
- Monitor children's media viewing. Images of the disaster and the damage are extremely frightening to children, so consider limiting the amount of media coverage they see. A good way to do this without calling attention to your own concern is to regularly schedule an activity--story reading, drawing, movies, or letter writing, for example--during news shows.
- Allow them to express themselves through play or drawing. As with younger children, school-age children sometimes find comfort in expressing themselves through playing games or drawing scenes of the disaster. Allowing them to do so, and then talking about it, gives you the chance to "re-tell" the ending of the game or the story they have expressed in pictures with an emphasis on personal safety.
- Don't be afraid to say "I don't know." Part of keeping discussion of the disaster open and honest is not being afraid to say you don't know how to answer a child's question. When such an occasion arises, explain to your child that disasters are extremely rare and they cause feelings that even adults have trouble dealing with. Temper this by explaining that, even so, adults will always work very hard to keep children safe and secure.

## **Adolescents**

Encourage these young people to work out their concerns about the disaster. Adolescents may try to down-play their worries. It is generally a good idea to talk about these issues, keeping the lines of communication open and remaining honest about the financial, physical and emotional impact of the disaster on your family. When adolescents are frightened, they may express their fear through acting out or regressing to younger habits.

- Children with existing emotional problems such as depression may require careful supervision and additional support.
- Monitor their media exposure to the event and information they receive on the Internet.

Adolescents may turn to their friends for support. Encourage friends and families to get together and discuss the event to allay fears.

***Information compiled from Mental Health America***