

After a Disaster—a Guide for Parents and Caregivers

Fact Sheet—From the National Institute of Mental Health

Natural disasters such as tornados or man-made tragedies such as bombings can leave children feeling frightened, confused and insecure. Whether a child has personally experienced trauma, has merely seen the event on television, or heard it discussed by adults, it is important for parents, caregivers and teachers to be informed and ready to help if reactions to stress begin to occur.

Children respond to trauma in many different ways. Some may have reactions very soon after the event; others may seem to be doing fine for weeks or months, and then begin to show worrisome behavior. Knowing the signs that are common at different ages can help parents and teachers to recognize problems and respond appropriately.

Preschool age

Children from one to 5 years of age find it particularly hard to adjust to change and loss. In addition, these youngsters have not yet developed their own coping skills, so they must depend on parents, family members and teachers to help them through difficult times.

Very young children may regress to an earlier behavioral stage after a traumatic event. For example, preschoolers may resume thumb sucking or bedwetting or may become afraid of strangers, animals, darkness, or 'monsters.' They may cling to a parent or teacher or become very attached to a place where they feel safe.

Changes in eating and sleeping habits are common, as are unexplainable aches and pains. Other symptoms to watch for are disobedience, hyperactivity, speech difficulties, and aggressive or withdrawn behavior. Preschoolers may tell exaggerated stories about the traumatic event or may speak of it repeatedly.

Early childhood

Children aged 5 to 11 may have some of the same reactions as younger boys and girls. In addition, they may withdraw from playgroups and friends, compete more for the attention of parents, fear going to school, allow school performance to drop, become aggressive, or find it hard to concentrate. These children may also return to behaviors that are 'more childish'; for example, they may ask to be fed or dressed.

Adolescence

Children aged 12 to 14 are likely to have vague physical complaints when under stress and may abandon chores, schoolwork and other responsibilities they previously handled. While on the one hand they may compete vigorously for attention from parents and teachers, they may also withdraw, resist

authority, become disruptive at home or in the classroom, or even begin to experiment with high-risk behaviors such as drinking or drug abuse. These young people are at a developmental stage in which the opinions of others are very important. They need to be thought of as 'normal' by their friends and are less concerned about relating well with adults or participating in recreation or family activities they once enjoyed. In later adolescence, teens may experience feelings of helplessness and guilt because they are unable to assume full adult responsibilities as the community responds to the disaster. Older teens may also deny the extent of their emotional reactions to the traumatic event.