

A LINE ON LIFE

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Children in Disasters *

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Currently, the people in the Midwest are picking themselves up after a disastrous flood, trying to get their lives in order and dealing with their own terror. With all of their efforts, often the needs of children are overlooked. Parents and teachers often underestimate how much children are stressed. What can we do to help our children to deal with these disasters?

With information obtained from the effects of Hurricane Andrew in August of 1992, psychologists have some recommendations to parents to help their children adapt to the effects of disasters.

- **Talk about the disaster.** Clearly explain what happened, so the children can understand. Children need repeated explanations, so they do not distort what has happened. According to one psychologist, reinforcing the children's fear by not talking about the disaster is "*one of the worst things a parent can do.*"
- **Encourage the children to talk about, draw or act out their feelings related to the disaster.** Allow them to express their emotions naturally by crying or even reverting to more infantile behaviors that they have previously abandoned. However, children may avoid voicing their fears, because they are concerned about adding another problem for their already overburdened parents. Parents – rather than "*being strong*" and not expressing their feelings – can model these feelings by allowing themselves to cry in front of their children. Children need to know that – although their feelings are uncomfortable – they are still acceptable. Under these circumstances, fear and anger are "*normal*" responses.
- **Help the children to reduce their fears by developing coping skills.** Reassure your children that you will take care of them and that they will be safe. Help them to differentiate between "*good*" and "*bad*" stimuli related to the disaster. They need to know that floods will not occur every time it rains and that some rain is needed to grow crops. Teach what they can do, if a similar situation occurs again. This training reduces their fears, because it gives them some sense of control.
- **Re-establish routines as soon as possible to restore structure in the lives of your children.** One way of doing this is to have the children return to school as soon as possible. Schools provide a safe, structured situation where your children can get additional support from their peers and teachers. However, initially children might not want to go to school, because they fear being separated from their parents. Your children need to develop and maintain supportive peer networks that cannot be found in the classroom. Children need the support of

peers. Special efforts need to be made to help children keep old friendships and form new ones.

Kids are often most helpful to other kids.

As with any crisis, there are some **positive results**. Positive outcomes of Hurricane Andrew included altruistic acts of both friends and strangers and an increased community spirit. (You probably have seen indications of this on news programs related to other disasters.) Other positive results include the increased sense of closeness within families who have to pull together to rebuild their lives. Both children and families can become stronger and more closely knit by successfully coping with any crisis.

* Adapted from Robin Michaelson, "When disasters hit, children need special help," [*APA Monitor*](#), April, 1993, pages 30-31.