

### **Tips for Parents: Helping Displaced Children Cope with Hurricane Katrina**

Some families are refugees in their own state or country. Although they may have escaped the worst of the destruction, they are dealing with major losses in their lives. They may have lost their homes and other belongings. They certainly have lost their familiar routine and surroundings. Children may not be attending school, or they may be attending a new school—an event for which they had no preparation. The whole family, including adults, may feel traumatized and be struggling. Parents may feel guilty because they can't provide everything their child needs. If you and your family are in such a situation, the following tips might be helpful.

Ways to help yourself feel more in control of the situation:

- Try to find an empathic individual who listens carefully to your feelings and offers support. Research has shown that children cope better with disasters if their parents cope well.
- Try to keep much of your expression of feelings away from the ears and eyes of your child. It is good to have a place to “let down” where you don't need to worry about being strong or in charge.
- Look for ways to get your own, as well as your child's, basic needs met: food, safe and comfortable shelter, clothing, health care, and enough sleep.
- If your needs are not being met, find other support people—relatives, friends, or volunteers—to help your children cope while you get the assistance you need.
- Reassure your child that you are doing the best you can to help her feel safe and that other people are helping you meet her needs at this time.
- Try to re-establish some routines that were in place before the crisis. For example, tell the same bedtime stories, try to eat some of the same foods, and use or replace favorite blankets or toys. Familiar routines can steady both you and your child.

Tips for helping your child cope with being displaced:

- Set and enforce limits on your child's behavior. Rules can be reassuring to a child who is feeling out of control. Establish a firm bedtime. Give him simple chores to do. Allow him to express his feelings and to get extra emotional support. However, children should still have a specific bedtime and some simple chores to do, and they need to know that hitting other people or taking things from others is still not allowed.
- Listen to your child and try to answer his questions. Some questions will be difficult to answer, such as “Why did the hurricane come?” or “When will we be able to go home?” Some of his concerns may be related to misunderstandings. It's helpful if you can provide correct information, which can be reassuring for a child. In some cases, it's OK to say that you don't know the answer. Sometimes you and your child can look for answers together.
- Reassure your child appropriately. You may know that your home is gone and you will never be able to return. If so, you could explain to your child that your family will find a

new home and that, together, you can make it as special as the old one was. If your family hopes to return to the former home but knows that it will be a long time, your child could be involved in making some simple decisions about the repairs, such as the color of his bedroom or a kind of tree he would like to plant in the yard. In the meantime, it is important for him to know that you will be with him and will do everything you can to keep him safe.

- Help your child mourn. Although children are young, they still feel losses, but in a different way from adults. They may miss different things from adults. It might be helpful for you to talk with your child about what he misses from your home, his school, or your neighborhood. Perhaps he could draw some pictures of those items. You might want to create a kind of memorial service for your house or even a swing set. Obviously, this will occur if lives were lost, but it is also important for children to say goodbye to toys and other items that were important to them.
- Watch for trauma reactions. Children may develop long-term fears of storms, rain, loud noises, separation from parents, and other events. For most children, this will get better over time. In addition, children may have nightmares and other difficulties dealing with the memories and losses. Again, those should go away over time. It is important, though, to note if the fears and worries make it difficult for your child to function in his normal life; if this difficulty lasts very long, it will be important to get professional help.
- Keep in mind that your child may respond to events on a different timetable than you do as an adult. It may appear that he has not reacted at all in the first days or weeks after the event, but months later he may have serious difficulties. Do not assume that your child is not affected if he doesn't talk about the situation now. Do not create a "cycle of silence." This happens when parents assume that children are not reacting, so they don't talk about the issues. Children see that their parents are not talking, so they begin to believe that it is not OK to talk about it. The crisis becomes a taboo subject, and no one gets his or her needs met. You and your child will need to have many conversations over many years. You should make sure your child knows that you want to hear his thoughts, feelings, and questions.

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