

## Helping Children Cope with the Impact of Hurricane Katrina

As caring adults and parents, we want to help children cope with the disaster of Hurricane Katrina in the best possible way. Those of us who live hundreds of miles from the Gulf Coast may not be directly affected by the wind, flooding, destruction, and other results of the hurricane. However, many of us know people who have experienced great hardship and some who have even lost their lives. Families with children from the affected area, many of whom have lost everything they own, may be settling in our towns and enrolling in our schools. At the very least, we and our children have been watching, hearing, and reading about the tragedy in the media and are worried about the survivors and the massive destruction of property.

How can we help children understand and emotionally cope with this catastrophe? Dr. Judith Myers-Walls, Associate Professor and Extension Specialist at Purdue University, in her resource, *Children as Victims of Hurricane Katrina*, makes numerous research-based recommendations for professionals and parents. The series of four fact sheets and three tip sheets for parents listed below are adapted from that resource. Information is organized according to the levels of impact that the hurricane has inflicted on children and their families.

### ***The levels of impact:***

There are several levels at which children may be touched by Katrina.

- Level 1: Children and families in the path of the hurricane. They are struggling for their basic existence.
- Level 2: Displaced families and children. They fled the destruction but now have no homes or jobs to which to return. They are refugees.
  - *Tips for Parents: Helping Displaced Children Cope with Hurricane Katrina*
- Level 3: Children and families who have family members, friends, or who know relief workers in the worst-hit areas and are worried about their safety.
  - *Tips for Parents: Helping Children Concerned about Loved Ones Affected by the Hurricane*
- Level 4: Children across the country who are watching the news coverage and reactions of others and may be feeling concerned and confused.
  - *Tips for Parents: Helping Children Watching from a Distance to Understand the Impact of Hurricane Katrina*

### ***How to use this series:***

- Hand the appropriate fact sheet to helping professionals or educators.
- Hand the appropriate parent tip sheet to parents of children affected by the hurricane.
- Use the fact sheets as media articles or a part of them as radio or television spots. Other media articles and radio spots are in development and will be available shortly.

### **Additional resources:**

You may also want to visit the national Cooperative Extension Web site of the Children, Youth, and Families at Risk Project (CYFAR) for additional excellent resources on coping with disaster, tragedy, and grief. These research-based, professionally-reviewed materials are available by visiting <http://www.CYFERnet.org> and clicking on *Hot Topic: Hurricane Katrina*, found on CYFERnet's home page.

### **Sources from *Children as Victims of Hurricane Katrina*, by Judith Myers-Walls, Ph.D.:**

Myers-Walls, J. A. (2004). Children as victims of war and terrorism. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment, & Trauma*, 8(1/2), 41-62.

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Norris, F. H., Byrne, C. M., Diaz, E., and Kaniasty, K. (2001a). *The range, magnitude, and duration of effects of natural and human-caused disasters: A review of the empirical literature*. National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. Retrieved August 2005 from [http://www.ncptsd.org/facts/disasters/fs\\_range.html](http://www.ncptsd.org/facts/disasters/fs_range.html)

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## Fact Sheet 1

### Helping Children Cope with the Impact of Hurricane Katrina: Children and Families in the Path of the Hurricane

#### *The situation:*

Many families with children were in the direct path of the hurricane. They have lost their homes, family members, and friends. By this time they have likely been evacuated to a safer place, but may still be facing great hardship.

All children and their circumstances are unique. While some children may be able to talk about what has happened to them and even to play, others may feel too grief-stricken, numb, confused, angry, or depressed to use words. They may be unable to understand the fact that everything that supported their daily lives is gone.

#### *What can we do to help?*

- It is likely that all children who were in the direct path of the hurricane still face the following situations:
  - Many of their basic needs are not being met, even in the place to which they have been evacuated. They are at risk of dehydration, starvation or malnutrition, heat-related illnesses, and diseases and injuries related to lack of sanitation and safe housing.
  - Schools, stores, and medical facilities may not be available.
  - There are no basic utilities to meet their needs.
  - These children have witnessed terrible events, possibly seeing death and violence, and watching the anger, frustration, and desperation of the adults around them.
  - Some of the children have been separated from their parents or other loved ones.
  - All these terrible experiences result in serious emotional needs that may not be met.
- It is important for us to empathize with the emergency needs of children and adults and to meet those needs in whatever way we can. Every youngster needs our most sensitive care.
- The first priority for these children is clearly to get assistance in meeting their basic needs.
- As much as possible, these children should be protected from the physical and psychological dangers around them, but their parents will need help in accomplishing that goal.
- The environment must be conducive for parents to provide the basic necessities to their children. Only after that occurs will parents be able to help the children deal with the stress and trauma.
- We can support those who are working to meet children's basic needs by contributing whatever resources the emergency personnel instruct us will be most useful.

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**Fact Sheet 2**  
**Helping Children Cope with the Impact of Hurricane Katrina:**  
**Displaced Children and Families**

*The situation:*

Some families are refugees. They may have arrived in your community, far from their own area. Although they have escaped the worst of the destruction, they are dealing with major losses in their lives. Many 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.

Those who want to support displaced children must realize that the parents also are traumatized and struggling. They have also been uprooted and have experienced major losses. They may feel guilt and frustration for not being able to provide everything their children need.

*What can we do to help?*

- Support parents in caring for their own needs. Research has shown that children will cope better with disasters if their parents cope well.
  - Find a way for parents to talk about their feelings and get support.
  - Try to keep much of the parents' talk with you away from the ears and eyes of children so the parents do not need to worry about being strong or in charge.
  - Find ways for parents to get their own, as well as their children's, basic needs met: food, safe and comfortable shelter, clothing, health care, and enough sleep.
  - If parents' needs are too great, find other support people to help children cope while the parents get assistance from relatives, friends, or volunteers.
- Reassure children that their parents are doing the best they can to help them feel safe and that other people are helping meet their parents' needs.
- Assist parents in re-establishing some routines that were in place before the crisis. For example, help them find the same bedtime stories at the library, prepare some of the same foods, or replace favorite blankets or toys with similar items. Familiar routines can be reassuring to both children and parents.
- Suggest other ways that displaced parents can help their children cope. Please refer to the tip sheet for parents, *Tips for Parents: Helping Displaced Children Cope with Hurricane Katrina*, for additional and more detailed suggestions.
- Set and enforce limits on the child's behavior. Rules can be reassuring to a child who is feeling out of control.
- Listen carefully to the child and try to answer questions with correct information. In some cases, parents may need to say that they don't know the answer.
- Reassure children appropriately. It is important for children to know their parents will be with them and will do everything they can to keep them safe.
- Help the children mourn in their own way for places and things that were dear to them.
- Watch for trauma reactions, such as long-lasting fears and nightmares. If fears and worries make it difficult for the children to function in their normal lives for very long, it will be important to get professional help.

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### Fact Sheet 3

## Helping Children Cope with the Impact of Hurricane Katrina: Children Concerned About Family or Friends in the Area of the Storm

#### *The situation:*

Children who have friends in the region of the hurricane may be concerned about their welfare. It is difficult for children (and for some adults) to know how close their loved ones may be to the places being shown in the media. The media images of chaos and pain cause them to worry whether their friends and family members are safe and secure. In some cases, they may not know when they will be able to see or talk with their loved ones.

#### *What we can do to help:*

- If possible and appropriate, suggest that parents allow children and family members to be in touch with the person in the affected area.
- Encourage children to write letters or journals, make audio or video recordings, or draw pictures of family members or friends who are out of contact. These activities may help children feel closer to those whose whereabouts are unknown.
- Limit media exposure and suggest that parents do the same. It is not appropriate for young children to see many of the distressing images. Provide opportunities for adults to watch and listen when children are busy with other things. Parents can encourage children to turn off the TV, play a game, or go outside.
- Provide older children with print media or Internet access rather than graphic footage on television. They will know a lot about the situation and be especially worried about loved ones. Preview a newspaper or Internet site before showing it.
- Find ways to take action and help, and incorporate parents in such activities. Taking action can help children feel in control. The kind of action may vary according to the child's age:

**Young children** benefit from play. They may act out events in the news and try to get control over the outcome. Some play activities related to hurricanes include building houses and knocking them down (and building them back up), playing with boats and water, hiding toys in a pile of blocks or in the sand and searching for them, pretending to be rescue workers, or drawing pictures of natural disasters.

**School-age children** may want to help to collect materials to support families and relief workers; draw or write poems or letters; write letters to children in the affected communities or to those who have lost loved ones; or learn about hurricanes.

**Adolescents** can help collect materials for the support of displaced families and survivors; give blood; write letters to specific people or communities; organize a vigil or memorial service; or study weather, geography, history of the region, oil production, or the distribution of goods in a disaster.

**Young adults** can reach out to people in their community who have survived disasters or are preparing for them, organize discussion or action groups, give blood, and raise funds. They may want to study the effectiveness of preparedness efforts and city planning in high-risk areas, as well as the role of poverty in this disaster.

- Hand parents the tip sheet, *Tips for Parents: Helping Children Concerned about Loved Ones Affected by the Hurricane*.

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**Fact Sheet 4**  
**Helping Children Cope with the Impact of Hurricane Katrina:**  
**Children Watching From a Distance**

*The situation:*

It may seem that children several states away from the Gulf may not need to talk about Hurricane Katrina or need reassurance or assistance. This is not true, however. Television and other news sources are covering the situation continuously, and the involvement of pop stars and other media figures brings the events into the lives of children across the country.

Children are also aware of the economic implications of this massive storm. They hear and see information and speculation about the hurricane's impact on gas prices. School bus policies are changing, the cost of goods used by children may rise, and many communities may cut services that benefit children. These occurrences can cause children confusion, anxiety, and anger as they experience the cancellation of field trips, sports events, and daily bus transportation to school.

*What can we do to help?*

- It may be important to reassure children and correct misunderstandings. Some of them may be afraid that a hurricane will come to their community.
  - Let them know there are things they can do to help prepare for dangers.
  - Reassure them that hurricanes will not come to their area—if this is true.
  - Take time to tell children about natural hazards that are local, and teach them some simple ways to keep themselves safe.
- Although it is important to deal with children's fears, expect their emotions to go beyond that reaction.
  - Let them express the full range of emotions about this disaster.
  - It is likely that they will also be sad about what is happening to other people.
  - They may be angry that not everyone is being helped as quickly as they would like.
- Provide some factual information to children.
  - Answer their questions, and consider looking up answers to questions you cannot answer quickly.
  - Follow the child's lead. Stop talking about the situation when the child seems satisfied.
  - Be prepared for new questions to appear later.
- Monitor media exposure.
  - It is not appropriate for young children to see many of the graphic images of destruction.
  - Adults should watch the news when children appear to be busy with other things. They may likely be listening and watching while playing.
  - The younger the children, the less they will benefit from the news coverage. Young children are likely to lose patience quickly with the constant news reporting when a major event has occurred. However, some of the reporting is likely to include a large amount of action footage that gets children's attention.
  - Parents can encourage the children to watch children's videos instead or, better yet, they can turn off the television and go outside or play a game.

- It is good for older children to learn about current events, but the intense news coverage may not be the best way for them to learn.
- A better way to inform children about the hurricane events may be with print media or the Internet. Newspaper pictures are less disturbing than video. Adults also can preview a newspaper or look at a Web site before showing it to the child. Previewing cannot usually happen with live TV.
- Find ways to take action and help. Taking action can help children feel in control. The kind of action may vary according to the child's age.
 

**Young children** benefit from play. They may act out events in the news and try to get control over the outcome. Some play activities related to hurricanes include building houses and knocking them down (and building them back up), playing with boats and water, hiding toys in a pile of blocks or in the sand and searching for them, pretending to be rescue workers, or drawing pictures of natural disasters.

**School-age children** may want to help collect materials to support families and relief workers; draw, write poems, or letters; prepare a performance such as a play, dance, or skit; write letters to children in the affected communities or to those who have lost loved ones; or learn about hurricanes or geography.

**Adolescents** can help collect materials for the support of displaced families and survivors; give blood; write letters to specific people or communities; organize a vigil or service; or study weather, geography, history of the region, oil production, or the distribution of goods in a disaster.

**Young adults** can reach out to people in their community who have survived disasters or are preparing for them, organize discussion or action groups, give blood, and raise funds. They may want to study the effectiveness of preparedness efforts and city planning in high-risk areas, as well as the role of poverty in this disaster.
- Talk with children about the ways people respond to stress.
  - Point out some negative things that some people have done, such as using violence.
  - Talk with children about what else people could do. Explore the frustration and anger that seems to be responsible for some negative behavior.
  - Parents and other adults can share how they deal with stress themselves, helping children make plans about what they will do the next time they feel stress.
- Work to preserve essential services for families, children, and communities. Remember that the most vulnerable individuals in any community—children, the elderly, and those with special health and learning needs—are affected first when hardships occur. Reductions in services have long-lasting, negative implications. Communities will be strong if they care for and support their weaker citizens.
- Consult research findings and content experts to make the most educated decisions regarding meeting the needs of children.
- Communicate with decision-makers and the community. Children may want to write letters, draw pictures, and/or set up displays to express their feelings about the hurricane. They could share their thoughts with the newspaper, the mayor, or the president.