

Tips for Parents: Helping Children Concerned About Loved Ones Affected by the Hurricane

You and your child may have friends in the region of the hurricane with whom you have not been able to make contact. You may be concerned about their welfare. It is difficult for adults, as well as children, to know how close your loved ones may be to the places being shown in the media. When you see images on television of chaos and pain, you may worry whether your friends and family members are safe and secure. You may not know when you will be able to talk with or see them.

Here are some suggestions for helping yourself and your child cope with the uncertainty, worry, and sadness of missing your loved ones:

- If possible, permit your child to be in touch with the person in the affected area. If you have phone or mail contact, your child can be reassured that loved ones are safe.
- If loved ones are out of contact, encourage your child to write letters or journals, make audio or video recordings, or draw pictures for family members or friends. She can perhaps plan to give those messages to friends and relatives when they are back in contact. This often helps children feel closer. It also might be good to look at pictures or listen to recordings of those who seem far away to keep them in your thoughts.
- Try to limit media exposure. Although it may be tempting to watch TV to try to catch a glimpse of loved ones, constant reminders of tragedy and problems may end up being more distressing. It is not appropriate for young children to see many of the images. Adults should watch the news when children are busy with other things. The younger the children, the less they will benefit from the news coverage. Young children are likely to lose patience quickly with the continuous news reporting when a major event occurs. They probably will not watch for long. However, some of the reporting is likely to include a large amount of action footage that gets children's attention.
- You can encourage your child to play actively. Turn off the television, and play a game indoors or outdoors with him.
- Your older child is likely to know a lot about the situation and be especially worried about loved ones. Generally speaking, it is good for older children to learn about current events, but the intense TV news coverage may not be the best way for them to learn. A better way to help your child learn about the hurricane events may be with print media or over the Internet. Newspaper pictures are less disturbing than video. You may want to preview a newspaper or Internet site before showing it to your child. Previewing cannot usually happen with live TV.
- Find ways to take action and help. Taking action can help children feel in control and relieves anxiety. The kind of action taken may vary according to the child's age.
 - **Your young child** will benefit from play. She may act out the 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.

- **Your school-age child** may want to help collect materials to support families and relief workers; draw or 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.
- **Your adolescent** 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.
- **Your young adult** can reach out to people in your community who have survived disasters or are preparing for them, organize discussion or action groups, give blood, and raise funds. He may want to study the effectiveness of preparedness efforts and city planning in high-risk areas or to explore the role of poverty in this disaster.

According to Purdue University's Dr. Judith Myers-Walls, media images of hurricane destruction can be confusing and upsetting to children and youth. It is good to minimize exposure to graphic footage of the disaster but to supply truthful information that is appropriate to the developmental level of your child. Most of all, children and youth need hope that loved ones will be found and reassurance that many people are working hard to rescue hurricane victims, clean up the destruction, and restore basic services.

Developed by Carole A. Gnatuk, Ed.D., Extension Child Development Specialist; Kay Bradford, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, UK Department of Family Studies; and Alex Lesueur, Jr., M.S.L.S., Staff Support Associate. Adapted with permission from the fact sheet, *Children as Victims of Hurricane Katrina*, by Judith A. Myers-Walls, Ph.D., CFLE, Associate Professor and Extension Specialist, Purdue University, W. Lafayette, IN. *September 2005*.

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