

Tips for Parents: Helping Children Watching From a Distance To Understand the Impact of Hurricane Katrina

It may seem that children several states away from the Gulf Coast may not need to talk about Hurricane Katrina or to need reassurance or assistance. This is not true, however. Television and other news sources provide information about 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 possible impact on gas prices. School bus policies are changing, the cost of goods used by children may rise, and many communities are likely to 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.

As a parent or relative of children watching events unfold from a distance, you may wonder what you can do to help them understand and cope with such a massive disruption to our national life. They may want to help in some way. Perhaps these tips will be of use to you.

- It will likely be important to reassure your children and correct misunderstandings. They may be afraid that a hurricane will come to their community.
 - Let them know that 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 fear.
 - Take time to listen carefully to their feelings and thoughts.
 - Let them express the full range of emotions about this disaster.
 - They will likely 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 your children.
 - Answer their questions, and consider looking up answers to questions you cannot answer quickly.
 - Follow each child's lead. Stop talking about the situation when your child seems satisfied. Each child is a unique individual and is also at a different developmental level from his or her brothers or sisters. Each child will probably have different reactions to your information.
 - Be prepared for new questions to appear weeks, months, or even years later.
- Monitor media exposure.
 - It is not appropriate for young children to see many of the graphic images of destruction. Such images cause unnecessary anxieties, even nightmares in some cases.

- Adults should watch the news when children appear to be busy with other things, but the children may 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.
 - You can encourage your children to watch favorite age-appropriate videos instead.
 - Better yet, you can turn off the TV and go outside or play a game with them.
 - 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 about the hurricane and its aftermath.
 - A better way to help them learn about the hurricane events may be with print media or the Internet. Newspaper pictures are less disturbing than TV. 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 for your children to take action and help. Taking action can help children feel in control. The kind of action taken may vary according to the child's age.

Young children benefit from play. They may act out the events in the news and try to get control by playing out 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 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 explore 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 tell how they deal with stress themselves, helping children make plans for 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 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.

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