

Helping Children Deal with Hurricane Katrina

Americans have dealt with disasters, both natural and manmade, throughout our history. We have lived through earthquakes, fires, floods, war, and the attacks of September 11, 2001. We have frequently been tested and have always prevailed.

Today, we must deal with perhaps the worst hurricane in our nation's history and the immense devastation on the Gulf Coast. Many lives have been lost, the great city of New Orleans and smaller cities and towns throughout the area are uninhabitable, property worth billions of dollars has been destroyed, and the economic impact has yet to be seen. We all, however, can see the harm done to children during the storm and in its aftermath.

Perhaps you were in the path of the destruction and have recently relocated to Kentucky. Maybe you have relatives or friends in the Gulf Coast area and are concerned for their safety. You might be worried about the storm's impact on gas prices or our economy as a whole. Even if you don't know anybody who was directly affected, your children may show signs of worry and emotional harm. And, if you are able, you and your children might want to help those who are hurting.

Children and Families in the Path of the Hurricane

The impact is most immediate and dire for these people. Many lost their homes, lost family members and friends, and have faced the loss of so much that supported their daily lives. Many of their basic needs have not been met, so they risk dehydration, starvation or malnutrition, heat-related illnesses, and diseases and injuries related to lack of sanitation and safe housing. Schools, stores, and medical facilities have not been available to them. There have been no basic utilities to meet their needs. Many have had to wait far too long to be rescued and relocated, and many have lived in horrendous conditions with thousands of others.

If you were in the path of the hurricane, you know the hardships firsthand. Your children

have witnessed terrible events, possibly including death and violence. Perhaps your children or those known to you have seen the anger, frustration, and desperation of the adults around them. You may know children who have been separated from their parents or other loved ones. As these events result in serious emotional needs that are difficult to meet, you will need to know how to help.

The first priority is clearly to get assistance in meeting the basic needs of these children. As much as possible, they should be protected from the physical and psychological dangers around them, but parents will need help in accomplishing that goal. The environment must be conducive for parents to provide them with the basic necessities. Only after that occurs will parents be able to help their children deal with the stress and trauma.

Displaced Children and Families

Some families are refugees from the storm. Although they may have escaped the worst of the destruction, they are dealing with major losses in their lives. You may have lost your home and other belongings. If you are displaced, you certainly have lost your familiar routine. Your children may not be attending school, or they may be attending a new school here in Kentucky—an event for which they had no preparation.

A difficulty in supporting your children is that you may also be traumatized and struggling. You also have been uprooted and have experienced major losses. You may feel guilt and frustration with not being able to provide everything your children need. This certainly is understandable.

In order to take care of your children's needs:

- Take your own needs seriously. Research shows that children cope better with disasters if their parents cope well. Find a way to talk about your feelings and get support. Do much of this away from your children so you don't need to worry about being strong or in charge. If necessary, find other support to help your children cope while you get help. Look to relatives, friends, or volunteers. Your shelter or social service agency may be able to provide help. Your children need to know you are safe and functioning, but you might not be able to meet all their needs right now. It is okay to get help. Do this now.
- Look for ways to re-establish some routines that were in place before the crisis. Tell the same bedtime stories, try to eat some of the same foods, use or replace favorite blankets or toys. This will help both you and your children.
- Set and enforce limits on your child's behavior. Even though your child has been traumatized, expectations for his or her actions are still important. Rules can be reassuring to a child who is feeling out of control. Allow children to express their feelings and get extra support. However, they still need a specific bedtime, do simple chores, and know that hitting other people or taking things from others is still not allowed.
- Listen to your children and try to answer their 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 their concerns may be the result of misunderstandings. You can provide correct information and help your child feel better. In some cases, you might need to say you don't know the answer, either. You might be able to look for answers together.
- Reassure your children appropriately. You may know your home is gone and you and your children will never be able to return. If so, explain that the family will find a new home and can make it as special as the old one was. If you hope to return to your former home but know it will be a long time, you could involve your children in making some simple decisions about repairs, such as the color of their bedrooms or a kind of tree they would like to plant in the yard. In the meantime, children need to know you will be with them and will do everything you can to keep them safe.
- Help your children mourn. Although they are young, children feel losses, but in a different way from adults. They may miss different things from adults. It might be helpful to talk with your children about what they miss from their home, school, or neighborhood. They could draw pictures of those items. Your family might want to create a kind of memorial service for your house, or even your children's swing set. Obviously, you will want to do this if lives were lost, but children also need to be able to say goodbye to toys and other items that were important to them.
- Watch for trauma reactions. Your children might develop long-term fears of storms, rain, loud noises, separation from parents, and other events. With most children, this will get better over time. In addition, your children may have nightmares and other difficulties

dealing with the memories and losses. Again, these should go away over time. It is important, however, to note if your children's fears and worries make it difficult for them to function in their normal lives; if this difficulty lasts long, you must get outside help.

- Keep in mind that your children will respond to events on a different timetable than adults. It might look like they have not reacted at all in the first days or weeks after the event, but months later they may have serious difficulties. Don't assume they are not affected if they don't talk about the situation now. Do not create a "cycle of silence." This happens when parents assume their children are not reacting so they don't talk about the issues. Children see when their parents aren't talking, so they begin to believe it's not OK to talk about it. The crisis can become a taboo subject, and then no one gets his or her needs met. You and your children will need to have many conversations over many years. Make sure your children know you want to hear their thoughts, feelings, and questions.

Children Concerned About Family or Friends in the Area of the Storm

Your children may be very concerned about the welfare of family and friends in the Gulf Coast area. It is difficult for children, and some adults, to know how close their loved ones might be to the places being shown in the media. Images of chaos and pain cause them to worry whether friends and family members are safe and secure. In some cases, they may not know when they will be able to talk with or see their loved ones.

Recommendations for children and families worried about loved ones:

- If possible and appropriate, allow children and family members to be in touch with the person in the affected area. If phone contact or mail is possible, it will be helpful for children to exchange messages to be reassured that their loved ones are safe.
- If loved ones are out of contact, encourage your children to write letters or journals, make audio or video recordings, or draw pictures for family members or friends. They could plan to give those messages to their friends and relatives when they are back in contact. This may help them to feel closer. It also might be good to look at pictures or listen to recordings of the people who seem very far away to keep them in their 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 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 seem to be 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 constant news reporting when a major event has occurred. 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 children to watch children's videos instead; or, better yet, you can turn off the TV and go outside or play a game.
- It is good for older children to learn about current events. They also will know a lot about the situation and be especially worried about loved ones. But intense TV news coverage may not be the best way to learn. A better way to help them become aware of the hurricane events may be through print media or the Internet. Newspaper pictures are less disturbing than video. You also can preview a newspaper or Internet site before showing it to your children. Previewing cannot usually happen with live TV.
- Find ways to take action and help. Taking action can help your children feel in control. The kind of action you take may need to 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 over the outcome. 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 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.

Adolescents can help collect materials to support 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 groups 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. They also may want to explore the role of poverty in this disaster.

Children Affected by Economic Repercussions of the Hurricane

Reports have provided much information and speculation about how the hurricane is causing a jump in gas prices, and there is also concern about other economic outcomes. School bus policies are changing, the cost of goods used by children may rise, and many communities may cut services that benefit children.

Some recommendations for minimizing negative repercussions of this situation:

- As resources become strained, it is important for communities and families to focus on their priorities. Remember that reductions in essential services for children could have long-term implications for those children and the families and communities in which they live.
- Remember that the most vulnerable individuals in any community are affected first when hardships occur. This includes children, the elderly, and those with special health and learning needs. Communities will be strong if they care for and support their weaker citizens.
- As decisions are made about distributing scarce resources, research findings and experts can be of invaluable assistance. Consult them to make the most educated decisions regarding meeting the needs of children.

Children Watching from a Distance

It may seem to adults that children in Kentucky don't need to talk about Katrina or to 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.

In addition to the suggestions above, following are suggestions for ways to help children who are watching from a distance to make this a learning experience and to take helpful action:

- Don't assume your children don't know about the storm and its aftermath. They probably know more than you think. Not talking about it does not protect your children and can tell them the subject is taboo.
- Be available and "askable." Let your children know it is okay to talk about unpleasant events. Listen to what they think and feel.
- It may be important to reassure children and correct misunderstandings. Some may be afraid that a hurricane will

come to their community. Some young children may even think that it already did happen to them. It is important to let them know that they are not at risk—if they are not. Let them know if there are dangers they can prepare for, or reassure them that hurricanes will not come to their area. (Katrina, for instance, did far less damage in Kentucky and brought us needed rain.) Take time to discuss the natural hazards that can happen where they live, and teach them some simple ways to keep themselves safe. Try to be realistic. You can try to support and protect your children, but you cannot keep all bad things from happening to them. You can always tell them you love them and that, no matter what happens, your love will always be with them. That is realistic, and may be all your children need to feel better.

- Although it is important to deal with children's fears, expect their emotions to go beyond that reaction. They very likely will also be sad about what is happening to other people and may be angry that not everyone is being helped as quickly as they would like. Let them express the full range of emotions.
- Provide some information. Answer children's 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 later.
- Monitor media exposure. It is not appropriate for young children to see many of the images. Watch the news when children are busy with other things. Help older children learn about current events through media other than television.
- Share your feelings. Tell your children if you are afraid, angry, or frustrated. It can help them to know that others also are upset by the events. They need to know that children aren't the only ones struggling with the news. If you tell

them about your feelings, you also can tell them how you cope. Be careful not to overwhelm them or expect them to find answers for you.

- 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 the children about what people could do instead. Explore the frustration and anger that seems to be responsible for some negative behavior. Tell how you deal with stress and help your children make plans for what they will do the next time they feel stress.
- Support children's concern for people they do not know. Children often are afraid not only for themselves, but also for people they don't even know. They learn that many people are getting hurt or are experiencing pain, and they worry about those people and their well-being. They might even feel less secure or cared for themselves if they see that others are hurting. It is heartwarming and satisfying to observe this level of caring in children. Explore ways to help others and ease the pain. In looking for feelings beyond fear, be careful not to encourage the kind of response given by one child: "I don't care if there's a war, as long as it doesn't affect me and my family."
- Help your children use creative outlets such as art and music to express their feelings. They may not be comfortable or skilled with words, especially in difficult situations. Art, puppets, music, or books can help children open up about their reactions. They may also want to draw pictures and then destroy them. Be flexible and listen. They might want to communicate with decision-makers and the community. Allow them to write letters, share their pictures, or set up displays to express their feelings about the hurricane. They could also share their thoughts with the newspaper, the mayor, or the president.

- One important way for both adults and children to reduce stress is to take action. See above for ways to help. Children may want to get involved in an organization committed to helping with emergencies, or to send money to help victims. Let children help to identify their action choices. They may have wonderful ideas. They also need to know that their parents, teachers, and other significant caregivers are working to make a difference. If they can see themselves as part of the solution, along with others, they will feel safer and more positive about the future. So do something. You and your family will feel more hopeful, and hope is one of the most valuable gifts we can give our children and ourselves.

Adapted from:

Myers-Walls, J. A. (2005). "Children as victims of Hurricane Katrina." West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Extension Service.

Myers-Walls, J. A. (1997?) "Talking with children when the talking gets tough." West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Extension Service.

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