Helping Children After a Natural Disaster: Tips for Parents and Educators

NASP
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School Psychologists

Adults can help children manage their reactions after a natural disaster. Follow these key reminders and visit www.nasponline.org/natural-disaster to learn more.

Remain Calm and Reassuring

Children, especially young ones, take cues from adults. Acknowledge loss or destruction, but emphasize efforts to clean up and rebuild. Assure them family and friends will take care of them and over time things will get better.

Acknowledge and Normalize Most Feelings

Allow children to discuss feelings and concerns, but don't force them to talk about the disaster. Listen, empathize, and let them know most initial reactions are normal. Be attentive to, and obtain assistance for, feelings and concerns that may suggest that the child (or anyone else) is in harm's way.

Emphasize Resiliency

Competencies

Help children identify coping skills used in the past when scared or upset.

Strategies

Encourage prosocial behaviors and good physical health.

Awareness

Highlight communities that have recovered from natural disasters.

Strengthen Peer Support

Children with strong emotional supports are better able to cope with adversity. Especially among adolescents, peer relationships can decrease isolation and supplement support from caregivers who are experiencing their own distress.

Take Care of Your Own Needs

You will be better able to help children if you are coping well. Take time to address your own reactions as fully as possible. Talk to other adults, take care of your physical and mental health, and avoid using drugs or alcohol to feel better.

Seek Help for Prolonged Signs of Distress

With the help of naturally occurring social support systems, most children will be fine. However, some may have reactions requiring professional help. Consider getting professional support for children whose reactions continue or worsen after a week or more. Your child's school can be a great source of support.