

How to help your child cope with a hurricane

When a hurricane causes destruction to a child's community, home, or school, and/or causes the death or injury of people important to the child, helping the child deal with these losses can seem overwhelming. However, with the proper support from a caring adult, children will be resilient and can heal from the effects of the hurricane.

What to Expect: Normal Responses to a Hurricane

| Preschoolers (Age 2 to 6) | School Age (Age 7 to 12) | Teenagers (Age 13 to 18) |
|--|---|--|
| Uncontrollable crying | Non-specific physical complaints (aches and pains) | Non-specific physical complaints (aches and pains) |
| Running aimlessly | Appetite changes | Appetite changes |
| Excessive clinging and fear of being alone | Sleep changes (trouble falling asleep, bad dreams) | Sleep changes (trouble falling asleep, bad dreams) |
| Regressive behavior | Sadness | Sadness |
| Sensitive to loud noises | Withdrawal from peers | Withdrawal and isolation |
| Confusion and irritability | Irritability | Irritability and acting out |
| Eating problems | Whiny, clinging | Excessive fears and worry |
| New fear of storms, wind, or water | Aggression and questioning authority | Agitation and apathy |
| | School avoidance, loss of interest and difficulty concentrating | Risk-taking behaviors and poor concentration |
| | Regressive behavior | Disenchantment (what's the point?) |
| | Rebellion at home or school | Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness |
| | New fear of storms, wind, or water | New fear of storms, wind, or water |

How to Help

- The most important thing that you can do for your child is to appear calm. Your child looks to you to create a feeling of safety and security. Share in simple terms how you are feeling and explain ways that you are trying to cope with what happened. Vent your concerns, fears, and anxieties to a caring adult, not your child.
- Each child reacts to disaster according to his/her emotional and developmental stage. Each stage brings to a child a new understanding of the world and how events happen. Therefore, it is very important to explain the events in words that a child can understand.
- Emphasize that you and other adults are doing everything possible to make sure that people are safe, secure, and free from harm.



- Be aware that your child will most likely receive information not only from you, but also from peers and the media. Ask your child about what he or she knows. If the child chooses to do so, let him or her explain in his or her own words the hurricane and its effects. This will provide you with the opportunity to clear up any misinformation or misconceptions.
- Minimize your child's exposure to media coverage of the hurricane. Viewing images or hearing descriptions of the hurricane and its aftermath will only heighten a child's anxiety. For example, a young child may not understand that media footage of collapsing buildings or distraught victims are replays of an event, and may think that a new hurricane has arrived.
- Provide children with the basic, accurate information that they need. Avoid details, as they will likely be upsetting.
- Be available and let your children ask questions. Know that you may need to repeat information that is difficult to understand.
- Respect your child's feelings, thoughts, and reactions, even if they are different from your own.
- Talk about ways that your child can help other victims of the hurricane. Writing cards, sending drawings, or volunteering time can help you and a child contribute to the community healing process.
- Some children may not want to talk about their feelings or fears. Help them express how they are feeling through drawing, playing, writing, or other age-appropriate activities.

Living in a Hurricane-Prone Area

If you have not been displaced by a hurricane or decide to return home after having been displaced, your child may have fears associated with living in an area where a hurricane has struck. Make a plan with your child about what to do to prepare for a future hurricane. The plan should include where to seek shelter and safety, as well as ways to communicate with each other should you be separated during or after the storm. As your child could be at school when a disaster strikes, it is also a good idea to familiarize yourself with the emergency plan of your child's school and make sure your own plan is compatible with the school's plan. Having a plan will give the child a sense of mastery over the danger and help to calm fears.

When to Contact a Mental Health Professional

Some of the normal reactions described here may not appear immediately, or may occur weeks after a hurricane. When occurring during the few weeks following a trauma, your child's reactions are normal and expected. Because the hurricane may have displaced you and your family and severely disrupted normal routines, a child may need an even longer recovery time. If your family has settled into a new post-hurricane life, but your child's emotional responses have persisted for a long period of time or are accompanied by significant functional impairment, then you should seek assistance from a mental health professional. If your child is "stuck" on the hurricane, and keeps re-living it in thoughts, feelings, images or behavior, talk with your primary care physician or pediatrician about getting a referral for a child and adolescent psychiatrist, social worker, psychologist or other mental health professional that has experience working with children. You can also contact your local school, children's hospital, or community mental health organization and ask for a referral in your area.

