

Things to think about for your family's self-care during the Fire

What is Disaster Exposure?

A child who has been exposed to a disaster may have been an eye-witness to a disaster. He or she might have been hurt or had a family member who was hurt or killed. Children are also exposed to disasters through TV, newspapers, word of mouth, or a mixture of these.

How can I help my child after a disaster?

- Assure children that they are safe.
- Bring your family together.
- Listen to your child.
- Let your child express how she feels. Don't minimize, or make light of, their feelings.
- Tell your child that you understand how they feel and that you're doing everything you can to manage the situation.
- Younger children may not be able to talk about what is bothering them and they may become clingy.
- Include your children, when possible, in your activities.
- Restore normal routines quickly – this builds confidence and positive coping.
- Have meals at the same time of day as you always do.
- Convey usual expectations – for example, beds still need to be made, rooms still need to be picked up, if possible. This provides a sense of normalcy.
- Let your child grieve over a lost toy, pet, or a missing blanket.
- Limit your child's exposure to television news and newspapers that contain imagery of violence, injury and death.
- Avoid places and situations that will bring back emotions and memories related to the disaster.

What Should I tell my child about the disaster?

"It's OK to tell me how you feel." Try to explain the disaster in simple terms that your child can understand. Listen and answer questions honestly, as best you can. Explain to your child what happened, what is happening and what is going to happen in words that he or she can understand. Do not give more information than they need or are prepared to hear.

How do I know if my child needs help from a mental health professional?

Everybody feels stress after a disaster. Many children are afraid that the disaster will happen again. Some short-term signs of stress may include sleep and appetite changes, headaches and upset stomachs, clinging, moodiness, irritability, fearfulness, sadness, and behavior changes like hyperactivity or being quick to anger or startle. Most signs of stress will disappear within a couple of weeks. However, if a child still shows these signs after a few weeks, and they are having trouble coping, or having trouble with family, friends, or school, parents should seek help from a primary care physician or mental health professional like a and adolescent psychiatrist.

What Symptoms Should I look out for?

Preschool Children may have more temper tantrums than usual, have hyperactive behavior, wet or soil themselves, or "go backwards" for potty training, be fearful, have nightmares, have sleep and appetite changes, and/or be clingy and extra dependent.

Younger School-Age Children may show how they're affected through play and behavioral symptoms like hyperactivity, sleep and appetite changes, a sudden drop in grades at school, not being able to focus, physical complaints like stomachaches and headaches, irritability and sibling rivalry.

Older Children and Adolescents can express how they feel in words and describe their fears and concerns.

Older Children may experience anxiety, panic, depression, and problem behaviors such as violence or conflicts with friends or family members.

Adolescents may show anxiety, have a depressed mood, and a fear of a shortened life, plunge into pleasurable activities, act more independent than usual, withdrawal socially, have suicidal thoughts or negative behaviors like substance use or abuse.

If we have been through a disaster will my child get PTSD?

The most common response to disaster is not PTSD but rather a spectrum of emotional behavioral and somatic, or physical, stress responses. It's hard to predict whether a child will develop PTSD after a disaster because there are so many different factors at play. Many different things determine a child's risk of developing PTSD.

Some of the most important factors include the size and length of trauma exposure, the degree of life threat and physical injury, the injury and death of loved ones, family and parent supports, whether a child has been exposed to trauma in the past whether the child has adaptive and coping skills, whether the child has preexisting psychological problems, being female and the child's ability to use caretaker support.

After 9/11 in 2001, a man-made disaster, a survey of 8266 children 4-12th grade found that PTSD increased from 2 to 10.5%. A natural disaster such as the Buffalo Creek Disaster, a major flood in West Virginia in 1972, resulted in one-third of the children being diagnosed with PTSD. A World Health Organization bulletin noted that 40% of children exposed to the Indian Oceana Tsunami in 2004 had PTSD.

8 Ways to talk to your kids about Disasters

1. Start by listening

Find out what your child already knows. You can then respond in an age-appropriate way. The aim is not to worry them with the devastating details, but to protect them from misinformation that they may have heard from friends or disturbing images they may have seen on television.

2. Provide clear, simple answers

Limit your answer to the question asked and use simple language.

3. If you don't know the answer, admit it

If your children ask questions that you can't answer, tell them so, and then do some research to try and help them sort it out. If they ask "Why did this have to happen?" don't be afraid to say "I don't know." If you are part of a faith community, the reassurance offered there can be invaluable in helping your child sort through the truth that awful things happen.

4. Follow media reports or online updates privately

Young children in particular are easily traumatized and seeing or hearing about the horrifying details of the fire may be more than they can cope with. Adults, too, should ensure they are dealing with their own emotions by talking to others, so they can continue to respond well to their children's needs.

5. Concentrate on making them feel safe

When tragedies occur, children wonder if the same event could happen in their hometown. If it was an act of nature that could not be repeated in your area, tell children that. Placing themselves in the situations of victims is not all bad – it is a sign of empathy, an essential life skill, but watch for signs of excessive worrying.

6. Give children creative outlets

Some children may not be prepared to speak about what they have heard, but may find drawing or other creative activities helpful to deal with their emotions and stress. Their drawings can be helpful starting points for conversation.

7. Model involvement and compassion

Tell your child that, as a family, you will be helping the people in Japan by giving a donation to a reputable charity such as World Vision.

8. Give your child a chance to be involved

Being involved in the solution will help relieve some of their anxiety. Invite them to contribute to the family's gift by giving something out of their piggy bank.