# Mississippi State University Extension Service

## **Children Need Help Coping with Disaster**

Natural disasters cause stress for people of all ages, but adults may need to provide extra help for children coping with disaster.

A child’s reaction to disaster will vary depending on age, maturity, and previous experience. Many children express common fears during or after a disaster. These fears may be caused by the dark, loud noises (thunder, lightning, heavy rain), or scary news on television. Children have trouble understanding what the disaster is and why it happened.

When children experience a natural disaster, parents and other adults should encourage them to express their feelings. They may choose to express their feelings through talking or playing.

Children often have many questions after a disaster. Take time to answer their questions, but do so with simple answers. Also take time to talk to children about your feelings.

Children may feel at fault for the disaster. Parents should reassure them that they are not responsible for what happened. They may also feel abandoned or neglected by parents who are busy cleaning and rebuilding after the disaster. Close contact assures children that you are there for them and will not abandon them. Spending extra time putting children to bed can help ease their concerns.

Other unusual behaviors a child may exhibit include hitting and kicking in anger and frustration, becoming quiet and withdrawn, retreating to behaviors shown at a younger age, exhibiting symptoms of illness, or refusing to be out of a parent’s sight.

When children exhibit such behaviors, they are craving attention. Parents need to continually respond to their needs and repeatedly assure them they are loved and their feelings are important.

**Adults need to remember several facts:**

* Children do not have mature reasoning skills.
* Children lack an accurate understanding of cause and effect.
* Children are not skilled at handling stress.
* Children need to discuss stress issues honestly and at their level of understanding.
* Children need help to prevent pressures from building.
* If the stress reaches a crisis level in the child, seek help from professional counselors.

**Following disasters, children may experience distress physically, emotionally, and behaviorally. The following are symptoms of distress in children ages birth to 5:**

* Disturbed sleep
* Disrupted eating habits
* Increased non-specific fears
* Increased emotional response or numbness (fussiness, little emotional response to positive or negative experiences)
* Separation anxiety or clinginess
* Increased power struggles and/or temper tantrums
* Regression or loss of previously acquired skills (bedwetting or baby talk)

**These are some ways to help young children after disasters:**

* Meet the child’s basic needs (sleep, food).
* Create or maintain a consistent routine.
* Provide clarification of safety versus danger, responsibility, and so forth.
* Provide children with cues of safety (picture of caregivers).
* Use distraction to help take the focus off the stressful situation.
* Balance acceptance of regression with age-appropriate expectations.
* Minimize exposure, specifically images, to news about the disaster event.
* Be aware of potential triggers (rainy days).
* Provide children with a vocabulary of feelings.
* Increase opportunities for active play, nurturing activities, and relaxation.

**Use the following tips to help children cope and understand disasters:**

* Encourage story-telling to help children reenact their experiences.
* Encourage children to draw what they have felt, wished, or dreamed after a disaster to express their emotions. Nonverbal activities allow children to share their feelings and begin to grieve.
* Encourage children to participate in age-appropriate group projects. These projects can include helping with recovery efforts.
* Provide age-appropriate toys to help children reenact their experiences and observations during the disaster.
* Provide close physical contact during times of stress to help children reestablish boundaries and a sense of security.
* Read age-appropriate books about the disaster, and talk about them.

### Activities

#### Rain Gauge

Materials: 2 liter bottle, rocks or sand, water, ruler, scissors, marker, tape

Instructions:

1. Cut the top of the bottle 10 centimeters from the top. Keep the top portion, but you will not need the cap.
2. Place the rocks or sand in the bottom of the bottle until it reaches the even sides of the bottle; then fill with water until it reaches the surface of the rocks/sand.
3. Take the top of the bottle (without the cap) and place it upside down into the bottom portion of the bottle; use tape to secure it to the bottle.
4. Using a ruler and marker, mark the centimeters starting right above the rocks/sand.

#### Barometer

Materials: small coffee can, plastic wrap, scissors, straw, index card, rubber band, and pen or pencil

Instructions:

1. Cover the top of the clean coffee can with plastic wrap and secure with a rubber band. Make sure it is airtight.
2. Place a straw horizontally (sideways) on the plastic wrap so that two-thirds of the straw is on the can.
3. Tape the straw to the middle of the plastic wrap so that it will not fall off.
4. Tape an index card to the can behind the straw; the straw will act as a pointer on the card.
5. Record the location of the straw on the index card with a pencil. Marks can be drawn on the index card to observe changes.
6. Wait 15 minutes, and record the location of the straw on the index card. Continue checking, and record the location of the straw as desired.

#### Playdough

To help soothe children during times of stress, like a natural disaster, give children some playdough. Here is a simple recipe to make playdough at home.

Materials: bowl, 1 cup of cold water, 1 cup of salt, 2 teaspoons of vegetable oil, food coloring, 3 cups of flour, 2 tablespoons of cornstarch, and an airtight container

Instructions:

1. Mix water, salt, oil, and food coloring (as desired) in the bowl.
2. Add flour and cornstarch until the playdough feels like bread dough.
3. Store in an airtight container when not in use.

### Books

#### Infant/Toddler

*Hello, World! Weather* by Jill McDonald

*Rain, Rain, Go Away!* by Caroline Jayne Church

*Maisy’s Wonderful Weather Book* by Lucy Cousins

*One Rainy Day* by Tammi Salzano

*Peek-a-Boo Rainbow* by Parragon Books

*Thomas and the Weather* by Rev. W. Awdry

#### Preschool

*Oh Say Can You Say What’s the Weather Today? All About Weather* (Cat in the Hat’s Learning Library) by Tish Rabe

*The Cloud Book* by Tomie dePaola

*Rain* (Weather Ready-to-Reads) by Marion Dane Bauer

*Let It Rain* by Maryann Cocca-Leffler

*The Wind Blew* by Pat Hutchins

*A Rainbow of My Own* by Don Freeman

*What Will the Weather Be?* by Lynda DeWitt

*Ruby’s Rainbow* by Grosset & Dunlap

#### School-Age

*I’ll Know What to Do: A Kid’s Guide to Natural Disasters* by Bonnie Mark and Aviva Layton

*Hurricanes!, Tornadoes!, or Weather Words and What They Mean* by Gail Gibbons

*Tornado! The Story Behind These Twisting, Turning, Spinning, and Spiraling Storms* (National Geographic Kids) by Judy Fradin and Dennis Fradin

*National Geographic Kids Everything Weather: Facts, Photos, and Fun that Will Blow You Away* by Kathy Furgang

### References

Kuffner, T. (n.d.). 6 homemade playdough recipes: Basic uncooked playdough. Retrieved from http://www.familyeducation.com/fun/playdough/6-homemade-playdough-recipes

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