

PARENTS...

INFORMATION TO HELP YOUR CHILDREN THROUGH THE FLOOD

Adapted with information from the NDSU Extension Service and University of Illinois Extension

WHAT CHILDREN MAY BE EXPERIENCING

There are two basic kinds of experiences that children who live through a disaster, such as a flood, may have: (1) the trauma of the disaster event itself; and (2) the changes and disruptions in day-to-day living caused by the disaster.

THE TRAUMA OF THE EVENT

The most obvious experience that children might have during a disaster is experiencing or witnessing a frightening event or series of events. These might include the destruction of homes, property, or personal possessions; being personally injured or faced with physical danger; or witnessing the death, injury, or pain of others. Some disasters, such as floods, may last a long time. Disasters such as these often set off a chain of events that can cause changes in day-to-day living conditions and result in long-term difficulties.

THE PILE-UP OF STRESSORS AND LONG-TERM STRAIN

The stresses of the disaster and its consequences may start to "pile up". Little hassles become difficult to deal with when there are other problems that also have to be faced. Difficulties faced by parents may affect children in indirect ways and the stresses may continue long after physical signs of the disaster have been cleared away. Strains such as these may have a bigger impact on children's adjustment than their experience of the event itself.

DISRUPTIONS TO DAILY LIFE

Life might not return to normal quickly following a disaster. There may be changes in living conditions that cause changes in day-to-day activities -- including strains in the relationships between family members or between friends, changes in expectations that family members have for each other and changes in responsibilities. These disruptions in relationships, roles, and routines may make life unfamiliar or unpredictable, which can be unsettling or sometimes frightening for children.

Some changes in living conditions that may cause difficulty include:

- Having a home destroyed
- Having to be relocated when a home is destroyed or damaged.
- Living in temporary housing or with relatives or friends; possible crowding and tensions
- Moving to a new community or going to a new school
- Having to adjust to a new environment and make new friends
- Being separated from family members
- Experiencing financial pressures from unemployment or loss of family farm or business.

Some changes that may disrupt relationships, roles and routines include:

- Not having parents physically or emotionally available following the disaster because they are busy cleaning up or are preoccupied, distracted, or distressed by disaster-related difficulties
- Being expected to take on more adult roles, such as watching siblings, helping with cleanup efforts or listening to parents' concerns and worries
- Not being able to spend time with friends or participating in activities, groups, hobbies, interests or usual routines.

RESPONSES OF CHILDREN TO DISASTERS

Like adults reacting to stress, children may experience a variety of emotions and may display a wide range of behaviors. Their reactions may vary depending on age or developmental stage, but there are some common behaviors that you might notice in your child as a response to disaster or disaster-related situations. For example, regressive behavior is more likely among younger children (under 7 years), while acting out and withdrawal is more common among older children. The main thing to remember, however, is that the best indicator of distress is **unusual** changes in behavior or appearance. There are other common responses that may be expressed. Children may:

- Be upset at the loss of a favorite toy, blanket, or teddy bear
- Be angry. They may hit, throw, kick to show their anger.
- Become more active and restless.
- Be afraid of the disaster recurring. They may ask many times, "Will it come again?"
- Be afraid to be left alone or be afraid to sleep alone. Children may want to sleep with a parent or another person. They may have nightmares.
- Behave as they did when younger. They may start sucking their thumb, wetting the bed, asking for a bottle, wanting to be held.
- Have symptoms of illness such as nausea, vomiting, headaches, not wanting to eat, running a fever.
- Be quiet and withdrawn, not wanting to talk about the experience, become upset easily, crying and whining frequently.
- Feel guilty that they caused the disaster because of some previous behavior.
- Feel neglected by parents who are busy trying to clean up and rebuild their lives and homes.

Although symptoms may result from trauma caused by direct exposure to disaster events, they may also be due to disruptions in relationships, roles and routines by the disaster.

HELPING YOUR CHILD COPE

During this time of stress for you, as a parent, your child may also need extra time and attention. Specific suggestions that may help your child better cope with a disaster and its aftermath include the following:

- Talk with your child, providing simple, accurate information to questions.
- Talk with your child about your own feelings.
- Listen to what your child says and how your child says it. Is there fear, anxiety, insecurity?
- Reassure your child, "We are together. We care about you. We will take care of you."
- You may need to repeat information and reassurances many times. Do not stop responding just because you told the child once or even 10 times.
- Hold your child. Provide comfort. Close contact helps assure children that you are there and will not abandon them.
- Spend extra time putting your child to bed. Talk and offer assurance. Leave a night light on if that makes the child feel more secure.
- Observe your child at play. Listen to what is said and how the child plays. Children frequently express feelings of fear or anger while playing with dolls, trucks or friends after a disaster.
- Provide play experiences to relieve tension. Work with play dough or paint, play in water, etc. If children show a need to hit or kick, give them something safe like a pillow, ball or balloon. Allow a safe, open space for them to play if possible.
- If your child lost a meaningful toy or blanket, allow the child to mourn and grieve (by crying, perhaps). It is all part of helping the young child cope with feelings about the disaster. In time, it may be helpful to replace the lost object.

Although many of the symptoms listed are considered "normal" responses to stress, you might want to consider asking for extra help if the symptoms include a very **unusual** change in the behavior or appearance of your child, or if they persist for several weeks. Your child's teacher, the school counselor or community mental health professionals may be sources of help in addressing your questions or concerns.

Additional information can be found at <http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/disaster/flood.html> or <http://web.extension.uiuc.edu/disaster/index2.html>.