

Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute

How Parents and Caregivers Can Help Children Cope After a Natural Disaster Such as Hurricane / Tropical Storm Harvey

Hurricanes and other natural disasters can have long and harmful effects on children and adults. Children can be vulnerable to these events because they often cannot meet many of their needs on their own. This puts them at more risk for troubles long after a disaster ends. Many groups have tools that parents and caregivers can use to help children cope with stressful feelings. Some of these groups are:

- National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
- American Academy of Pediatrics
- Mental Health America
- Save the Children

How Children and Youth Respond

It is normal to feel worried, sad, confused, or fearful. Love and support from a parent or family member can help these feelings go away a few weeks after the storm. But keep watch. If you feel your child is having too hard a time, ask for help. Talk with another parent, a friend, or someone from your church. If you have worries about your child's health, talk to their doctor. But if your child still has major problems for more than six weeks after the hurricane, contact a counselor.

Each child is different. Children have their own needs. One child may need more support to meet the same need as another child. Their experience also matters. Reactions can vary for many reasons. One reason would be how closely they were affected by the storm. Another would be if they knew someone that was harmed. Another factor is how much news they have watched about the disaster. Also, their reaction depends on how long before their routine returns to being safe and predictable. Another reason would be how well their parents or caregivers are coping with the disaster or if they have a history of mental health issues or major stress. Also, a child's age, level of development, and personality all shape how he or she responds.

Common Reactions

- **Younger children** may become more dependent than usual (clingy, refuse to sleep alone, and fearful of being separated from parents). They may have more temper tantrums, be more aggressive, wet the bed, or be much more active.

- **Older children and youth** may experience more stress, sadness, or problems with school or people. They may also act in riskier ways, such as using alcohol or drugs.

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