

Impact on children and families

Hurricane warnings produce emotional distress. People try to figure out when the hurricane will hit. The fear and anxiety may be contagious. People may be frantic. They may shop for food, water and emergency supplies. They may look for flashlights, candles, generators, and boards to cover windows. People may line up at gas stations and want to fill their tanks to get ready for evacuation. Families must decide how to meet in a safe place or make final evacuation plans.

A hurricane threatens the usual feelings of safety. Heavy rain, flooding and winds may disrupt telephone and power lines. This breaks down communication. Food and water supplies may be affected. A powerful storm can blow off the roofs of houses. It can break windows or blow open doors. It can destroy entire homes. Leaving a shelter is dangerous. Wind-blown debris can cause injury or death.

Children may see unusual fear in their parents and caretakers. They may lose their home. They may lose cherished toys. They may be exposed to collapsed or damaged buildings. Their school may be destroyed. Familiar landmarks may be gone.

There will be a wide range of psychological problems. Individuals with pre-existing emotional and behavioral problems may get worse. This could happen if:

- They lose their supports.
- Their routine is upset.
- They do not have medicines.

People may have emotional problems if they lose:

- Their homes.
- Their jobs.
- Family members.
- Friends.

Facing constant problems may affect the ability to recover. Children and adults may have traumatic reminders. They may re-live the bad experience. They feel the same fears they had during the hurricane. Reminders can include:

- Hurricane warnings.
- Dark clouds.
- Lightning bolts.
- Heavy rain.
- Wind.
- Activities linked to hurricane preparations. Common emotional reactions of children and families include:
 - Feeling angry or sad.
 - Worries about the future.
 - Fear that it will happen again.
 - Temper tantrums.
 - Irritability.
 - Being hyperactive.
 - Clinging to others.

- Stomach aches.
- Headaches.
- Loss of appetite.
- Nightmares.
- Sleep problems.
- Fears about the safety of family members, friends and loved ones.
- Problems in school.
- Decreased motivation.

Teens may respond differently. They may:

- Feel withdrawn or angry.
- Take risks because they want to live life to the fullest.
- Go against authority.

What you can do to help your child

Spend time talking to your children. Let them know it is okay to ask questions and share their worries. Issues may come up more than once. Be patient. Be open to answering questions again to clarify things. It will be hard to find time to have these talks. Use regular family mealtimes or bedtimes to talk.

Let children know what is happening in the family. Tell them what is going on with their school and the community. Answer questions briefly and honestly. Be sure to ask children for their opinions and ideas.

For younger children, read a favorite story or have a relaxing family activity. This can help them feel more safe and calm. To help children recover:

- **Be a role model.** Try to remain calm. Your child can learn from you how to handle stressful situations.
- **Listen to adult conversations.** Be aware of what adults are saying about the hurricane. Or the damage. Children may misinterpret what they hear and be frightened.
- **Limit media exposure.** Protect your child from too many storm images:
 - On TV.
 - On the Internet.
 - On radio.
 - In the newspaper.
- **Reassure children.** Tell them they are safe. You may need to repeat this often. Even after the hurricane passes. Spend extra time with them. Play games outside. Read together indoors. Or just cuddle. Be sure to tell them you love them.
- **Replace lost or damaged toys as soon as you can.**
- **Calm worries about their friends' safety.** Phones may not be working. But make sure your children know that their friends' parents are taking care of them. Just the way you are taking care of your children.
- **Tell children about the community.** Make sure they know that things are being done to fix utilities. These can include electricity, phones, water and gas. Tell them that the town or city will remove debris. They will help families find housing.
- **Take care of your children's health.** Help them get enough rest. They need exercise and healthy food. Be sure they have a balance of quiet and physical activities.
- **Keep the routines of daily life.** Children feel more secure with structure and routine. Keep to regular mealtimes and bedtimes if possible.
- **Maintain expectations.** Stick to your family rules about good behavior and respect for others. Continue family chores. Children may need more reminding than usual.

- **Encourage children to help.** They cope better and recover faster if they feel they are helping. Give them small clean-up tasks. Then provide activities not related to the hurricane. These can include playing cards or reading.
- **Be extra patient once children return to school.** They may be more distracted and need extra help with homework.
- **Give support at bedtime.** Children may be more fearful when separating from parents. Spend more time talking, cuddling or reading. Start the bedtime routine earlier. This will help them get the sleep they need. If young children need to sleep with you, let them know it is temporary. Soon they will go back to sleeping in their own beds.
- **Help reduce boredom.** Daily activities may be disrupted:
 - Watching TV.
 - Having friends over.
 - Playing on the computer.

Special activities, like sports and or dance classes, may be stopped. Help children think of other things to do, such as:

- Board games.
- Card games.
- Arts and crafts.

Try to find community programs with child-friendly activities, such as:

- The library.
- A park program.
- A local YMCA.

- **Keep things hopeful.** Stay positive about the future. Your positive outlook will help children see good things in the world around them. This will help get them through challenging times.

Get professional help if your child has problems more than six weeks after the hurricane.

What parents can do to help themselves

Parents may neglect their own needs during a crisis. To take care of their children, parents must take care of themselves. Here are some things parents should keep in mind:

- **Take care of yourself.** Eat healthy, get enough sleep and get proper medical care.
- **Support each other.** Parents and other caregivers should talk together. Provide support as needed.
- **Put off major decisions.** Avoid unnecessary life altering decisions during a stressful time.
- **Give yourself a break.** Try not to overdo cleanup activities. Avoid lifting heavy items or working for long periods of time.

How families can help children cope with fear and anxiety

A hurricane may touch your family personally or news of it may come to your home via TV or newspapers. You can help children cope with the anxiety. Listen to your children. Talk to them about their concerns. This can reassure them that they will be safe. Encourage them to discuss what is happening around them. Even young children have questions about tragedies. Children react to stress at their own level.

Here are pointers for parents and other caregivers:

- **Encourage children to ask questions.** Listen to what they say. Comfort them. Address their specific fears. It is okay to admit you cannot answer all of their questions.
- **Talk on their level.** Talk in a way they can understand. Do not get too technical or complicated.
- **Find out what frightens them.** Encourage children to talk about fears they have. They may worry that someone will harm them at school. Or that someone will try to hurt you.

- **Focus on the positive.** Make sure they know that most people are kind and caring. Tell children about heroic things done by ordinary people to help victims of tragedy.
- **Pay attention.** Your children's play and drawings may show their concerns. Ask them to tell you what is going on in the game or the picture. It is a chance to clear up confusion, answer questions and give comfort.
- **Create a plan.** Establish a family emergency plan for the future. This can include finding a meeting place where everyone should gather if something happens in your family or neighborhood. It can help you and your children feel safer.

Federal Aviation Administration

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