

Action Station: Helping Children Manage Anxiety During Disaster

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1. Children need to be able to talk and ask questions about what happened.

Children easily pick up how adults around them feel about certain things. Do not ignore their questions just because the event may have happened in another city or another country. When children see it on television, it may feel to them like it is happening close to where they are.

If children ask you a question, then answer it as best you can. It is better to say you do not know the answer than to avoid the issue. When they see you avoid certain subjects, they may feel that you are worried or fearful and so they will be too.

Questions and fears may arise several days, weeks, or months or even years later, especially after watching news items on television. Also, if you say to your child, "I don't know" that is 100 times better than if the child feels they cannot talk about it or ask the question.

For example, they may still be thinking about:

- What happened to the people who were inside a building/car/etc. but could not get out?
- The people they saw interviewed who lost their homes or loved ones, especially those who still did not know if their loved ones were safe.
- The issues of faith, God, and not knowing why this happened.
- Will there be another fire, and where will it be?
- The animals that died in the fire.

2. Reassure the children they are safe.

Children need to be reassured that they (and their caregivers/family) are safe. You do this by taking the time to talk about what happened and listening to their thoughts and feelings.

Give them reasons why they are safe. For example, you could say something like:

- They have a family emergency kit – including smoke alarms.
- Their house is well built and away from the disaster area.
- They have a thought-out plan - their parents will look after them.
- They are a long way from the town/country where this is happening.
- They can talk to their trusted adult.

3. Give the children strategies to cope

Discuss with your children what they would do as a family in case of an emergency.

- Encourage family fire drills and having a plan of what to do in emergency.
- Who can they talk to if something was happening to them (like bullying/abuse/etc.).
- Have a family emergency kit, which will include candles, first aid, and emergency food in case of the electricity being cut. Best kept in a bucket with a lid, as the bucket would also be handy.

4. Keep doing regular things.

Children find security in doing regular, normal and planned events.

For Parents: To cancel an outing or to pull children out of school when a crisis like this occurs may be helpful to parents but can hurt a child's sense of security – especially for younger children.

This may seem strange, but if they can do something fun with their child in the midst of the devastation, it can give them something good to think back on. Let them know they are still allowed to enjoy themselves. Go to a movie or restaurant, etc.

5. Build resilience in children by helping them help others.

Do a project to help the victims. It could be as simple as giving money or sending a gift. Helping others in time of crisis will help build their resilience – even if they are victims themselves.

6. Look for symptoms of anxiety

Often children appear to perform very well at the time of a crisis, but can, later on, even years later, experience some symptoms. These include anxiety, fear, panic, anger, difficulty sleeping, waking throughout the night, nightmares or daydreaming. You can see these symptoms by:

- Change in appetite,
- Reliving images of traumatic events or dwelling on the event.
- A child may become easily angered or upset or may withdraw or become reluctant to be open or talk.
- Headaches, stomach aches, nightmares, indigestion are typical by-products of this type of stress.

Any of these symptoms may indicate emotional stress, and the first response is to give hugs and reassurance. However, if they continue for more than a few weeks, seek professional help – usually your GP.

7. Control the Television

Advice to Parents: Tune in for updates and stay informed, but do not let the television reports of the tragedy dominate the atmosphere of their home. Instead, allow their children to watch their favourite programs or movies.

8. Pray with Children

Praying will provide an answer both for the victims and for your children. Children will feel empowered when they know they can pray.

11. Questions on Faith: If God is good, then why do things happen to good kids?

Children may be wondering about why 'God' allows things like this to happen to innocent people, especially when he loves us. It may be 'easier' to explain 'people hurting people' because we can say that these people are 'bad'. However, it is challenging to explain away natural disasters because they may be seen as something that only God has the power to stop.

The most important thing to do if the children are concerned is to have the talk.

Be ready to say that you do not know why. Some things are just too difficult to understand.

Talk about what they can do to help. This is God's way.

You might want to say something like this:

Natural disasters are not God's way of hurting people. These things happen for many reasons but it is not God wanting to hurt people. God's way is for us to do all we can to protect ourselves, and the ones we love, and to help others in need. We see many examples of this in the people who are supporting the victims right now.

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