

# Helping Children Cope with Natural Disasters



When natural disasters occur, children need to know that they are safe and will be kept safe. *Will I be okay? Will you be okay? Will everyone I know be okay?*

## **Help the child:**

- Identify his or her own fears through conversation that the child leads.
- Always try to be realistic while reassuring the child that it is unlikely the disaster will happen again the same way. Assure the child that if there is a next time, "We will be ready."
- Respect the child's fears and remember that fear is not always rational.

Young children are unable to process or understand their feelings and some children may display some behaviors resulting from stress. Keep in mind that all children react to situations in different ways and may not show stress in the same way.

## **Things to Keep In Mind When Helping Young Children Under Stress**

- **Speak calmly and reassuringly**- Even if you are upset, try not to show your stress.
- Keep **routines normal and consistent**- Continue daily rituals, routines, and activities.
- Maintain a "**peaceful**" atmosphere.
- Make sure children are eating **regular, healthy meals**.
- Always **reassure** children that you will do whatever you can to keep them safe.
- **Limit exposure** to the media and adult conversation about the disaster
- **Answer any questions** children have. Be honest without giving a lot of detail.
- **Talk about the event** when children bring it up-don't try to change the subject. Let the children talk about what they have heard and correct any "false" ideas the children have about what has happened. Make sure language and information you use is *age appropriate*.
- **Be available**, calm and loving.
- Give hugs, smiles, etc. to **comfort** the children.
- Give children opportunities to **express their emotions**: clay, building, drawing, dramatic play, acting out fears)
- Teach children **calming techniques** and ways they can **control themselves**: dance to music, breath deeply, art activities, taking time to rest.
- **Remember that it could take weeks or months**, or even years, for some children to fully recover or even show symptoms of stress after a disaster. Every child is different.
- Give children **choices** in their daily routine.
- Maintain **clear rules and expectations** for appropriate behavior. This can provide the children a sense of control and safety.
- Read stories about children feeling scared or going through similar situations.

Adapted from *What Happened to My World?* By Jim Greenman, 2005

*Nurturing Children After Natural Disasters?* Developed by NACCRRRA, 2005.

*Promoting Healthy Social Behaviors in Child Care Centers*