

# Helping children cope with disaster



## How could my child respond to trauma or disaster?

Your child could:

- Be scared to be away from their parent
- Have changes in behavior, such as going back to younger behaviors like:
  - Sucking their thumb
  - Clinging to parents
  - Wetting the bed
  - Being scared of the dark
  - Sleep problems
  - Temper tantrums
- Cry
- Withdraw or not take part in normal or routine activities
- Not want to go to school or does not do well in school
- Have trouble concentrating
- Have physical complaints like stomach aches and headaches
- Have feelings of guilt
- Ask questions and even repeats the same question over and over again
- Act out situations during playtime
- Fear for their safety
- Fear death
- Lack trust in others

## How can I help my child?

- Know that your child will have a range of reactions.
- Prepare yourself. Be aware of what is going on so you will be able to answer questions.
- Limit TV and radio time.
- Have your child tell a story, draw a picture or play with puppets to learn about their concerns, fears and understanding.
- Explain things. Be honest when you answer questions.
- Listen to your child's concerns. Clarify any misunderstandings about risks and danger.
- Talk about safety and what is being done to protect your child.
- Comfort your child. Hold or rock them.
- Help your child talk about feelings. Let them know these feelings are normal.
- Keep their routine as close to normal as possible.
- Have times to be together as a family.
- Use a nightlight if your child is scared of the dark.
- Tell your child the trauma or disaster was not their fault.
- Let them know it is okay to cry.
- Give your child ways to express feelings like drawing to tell a story about what happened.
- Be aware of how you respond. Show good self-care behaviors.

**In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.**

# Helping children cope with disaster, continued

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## What else can I do to help?

- Do not force your child to talk about the trauma or disaster.
- Make a disaster safety plan for your family.
- Ask a police officer, military personnel or firefighter talk to your child's class.
- Get help from healthcare providers if your child's reactions get worse over time and greatly affect their daily routines.

## How do I talk with my child?

Try these questions and comments to help your child talk with you:

- Tell me what you think happened...
- What does "war" mean?
- What does it look like?
- I am worried about...
- This makes me feel...
- What I would like to do...
- The questions I have about the disaster are...
- When I feel scared, mad, worried or sad, what helps me to relax or feel better is...
- Who can I talk to about my feelings?

## Where can I learn more?

Check your local library, church and school for available resources. You may also visit these websites:

- [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov) (Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Violence and Disaster)
- [www.fema.gov/kids](http://www.fema.gov/kids)
- [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org)
- [www.choa.org](http://www.choa.org)
- [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov)

*Children's Healthcare of Atlanta has not reviewed all of the sites listed as resources and does not make any representations regarding their content or accuracy. Children's Healthcare of Atlanta does not recommend or endorse any particular products, services or the content or use of any third party websites, or make any determination that such products, services or websites are necessary or appropriate for you or for the use in rendering care to patients. Children's Healthcare of Atlanta is not responsible for the content of any of the above-referenced sites or any sites linked to these Sites. Use of the links provided on this or other sites is at your sole risk.*

**This teaching sheet contains general information only. Talk with your child's doctor or a member of your child's healthcare team about specific care of your child.**

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