

# Helping Children to Cope During a Hurricane

are afraid of being separated from family and left alone. If at all possible, avoid any separations with your child, even to go to the store or the damaged area. If you must leave children with friends or relatives, follow the steps below to reassure them:

- Let your child know how long you will be away.
- Let your child know how often you will be in touch with him or her.
- Keep in touch with your child frequently and as regularly as you promised.
- Keep track of your child to be sure he or she is provided for.

## ***Stay tuned in to your child***

Some children may need additional help in coping with a hurricane. Their behaviors may indicate additional problems.

Following a disaster some children may:

- Be upset at the loss of a favorite toy, blanket, or pet
- Be angry. They might hit, throw, kick to show their anger
- Become more active and restless
- Be afraid of the hurricane recurring
- Want to sleep with a parent or other person
- Have nightmares
- Have symptoms of illness such as nausea, vomiting, headaches, lack of appetite
- Be quiet and withdrawn
- Become upset easily- crying and whining frequently
- Feel guilty that they caused the disaster because of some previous behavior
- Feel neglected by parents who are busying trying to clean up and rebuild
- Refuse to go to school or to child care
- Become afraid of loud noises, rain, storms
- Not show any outward signs of being upset

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*Source: Helping your child cope with disaster, Clemson University Extension Document, September 1989.*

For further information on hurricane preparedness contact Pasco County Extension, 36702 State Road 52, Dade City, FL 33525  
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*Brought to you by your Family and Consumer Sciences Team.*



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A hurricane is a frightening experience for everyone, but for a young child it can be extremely threatening. An extra amount of understanding and patience is usually necessary for a child who can not cope with the situation.

## ***Making plans for the family***

Families that work together to prepare for a hurricane will cope better than those who do not take precautions. Consider how your children might react in a disaster, what your own reactions might be, and how the crisis could affect each person's emotional and physical well-being.

- Involve children in emergency planning, such as reviewing hurricane supplies check list and writing a shopping list
- Follow the suggestions or public warnings by emergency services for the care and safety of your child.
- Plan in advance for a designated friend or relative in another state that your family can call to 'check-in' with if necessary.
- Talk to children simply and matter-of-factly about the hurricane and how it is to be handled. Give them clear instructions.
- Play "Let's pretend . . ." games with young children to help them work out "what if" situations.
- Evacuating with your family:
  - Pack a small bag or box of supplies for meeting a variety of possible situations.
  - Remember diapers, food and drinks for children.
  - Include a few games, books and hobby material for sitting out emergencies.
  - Bring a favorite toy or stuffed animal to help children feel more secure.

## ***Coping with emotions***

Once families are out of physical danger, they may be surprised that children are still afraid. Research indicates that children's fears vary according to age, maturity, and

previous learning experiences. Four major fears common in children are: death, darkness, animals, and abandonment. In the experience of a hurricane, children would have encountered three out of the four major fears. Undoubtedly, this will have an impact on their ability to cope for quite some time. It is especially important for parents to continue to provide emotional support for their children even after the storm is over.

- Children mirror their parents' anxieties so be calm to help reduce your children's fears.
- Reassure children often and repeatedly.
- Listen to your children express their fears.
- Encourage them to talk and ask questions.
- Spend extra time before bedtime.
- Leave a door open and nightlight on.
- Maintain close contact, hold and touch your child.
- Allow for mourning and grieving over the loss of a meaningful toy or blanket

Another important aspect about children's fears indicated in current research is that fears may be intensified when adults back away from discussing the topic with children. Many families ban all painful topics from family conversation, yet, one of the most important steps adults can take is to share the time to talk with children.

In a crisis situation a child may show unusually "childish" behavior, such as bed wetting, thumb sucking and clinging to parents. These are signs of anxiety and are usually temporary. Try not to focus on these behaviors and don't punish children who act this way.

## ***If you must leave your child***

Children who have been through a disaster

