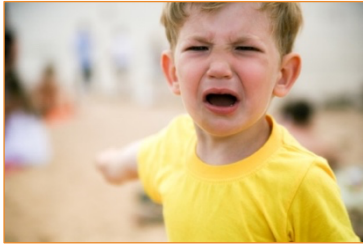


Tip Sheets

Common Reactions of Children After an Emergency Event



Emergency events can influence the psychological functioning, emotional adjustment and development of

children. It is important to keep in mind that “one size does not fit all” when it comes to how young children respond to an emergency event.

Each child will have his/her own unique response and needs. Responses will differ based on the child’s age, developmental level, temperament, how closely he/she is impacted by the experience, and the amount of media exposure.

The following are some of the common reactions of children after an emergency event.

Children 0 to 5 Years

Most of the symptoms of children from birth to five years of age consist of nonverbal fears and anxieties. These include:

- Various forms of crying (whimpering, screaming and cries for help)
- Becoming unable to move with trembling and a frightened expression
- Running toward adults or running aimlessly
- Clinging to adults more than usual
- Repeatedly waking up
- Night terrors and/or nightmares (may wake up confused and frightened)
- Inability to sleep alone
- Fear of the dark (want light left on at night)

- Difficulty at naptime/bedtime (reluctance and/or refusal to go to sleep)
- Sensitivity to loud noises
- Fears related to the weather (lightning, thunder, rain and/or wind)
- Irritability
- Confusion
- Sadness, especially related to loss of persons or favorite possessions
- Difficulties with speech
- Feeding/eating issues
- Scared of new things/change (irrational fears)
- Not wanting to participate in activities/play previously enjoyed

Children 6 to 11 Years

Children in this age group show an increasing awareness of danger to self, family, friends and their surroundings. They may develop imaginary fears that appear to be unrelated to the event. Other behaviors include:

- Irritability
- Noncompliance
- Depression
- Excessive clinginess
- Somatic complaints (headache, stomachache, nausea)
- Vision or hearing problems
- Strong feelings of anger or sadness
- School refusal
- Behavior problems that occur for what seems to be little or no reason
- Change in school performance
- Aggressive behavior/fighting

- Loss of interest/withdrawal
- Distractibility: difficulty with concentration, focus and task completion
- Not wanting to participate in activities/play previously enjoyed
- Issues with peer relationships (social withdrawal, isolation, difficulty initiating/maintaining play interactions, etc.)
- Behaving as if he/she has no feelings (numb)
- Ongoing concern over own safety and safety of others
- Becoming extremely upset
- Disruptive behavior/frequent outbursts
- Intense preoccupation with details of the event: draw/act out the event
- Display feelings of guilt/shame about what they did/did not do during the emergency event

Signs of Regression

Children of all ages may regress or begin to exhibit behaviors that are considered inappropriate for their age. Regressive behaviors include:

- Thumb sucking
- Bed-wetting/loss of bladder/bowel control
- Baby talk
- Fear of darkness or animals
- Fear of being left alone
- Fear of crowds and/or strangers
- Irrational fears (weather, safety of buildings, etc.)
- Inability to care for self (dressing, eating, etc.)
- Sleep problems (interrupted sleep, fear of falling asleep, etc.)

Behavioral reactions and changes are natural and to be expected following an emergency event. Regardless of their age, children do not always have the words to communicate how they are feeling or know how to talk about the event they

have experienced. Therefore, many young children will communicate through their behavior.

It is important to keep in mind that not every child who has experienced an emergency event/disaster will have an immediate reaction. Reactions to these types of events can appear days, weeks and even months after the actual event.

Additionally, these types of reactions may also be observed in children who were not directly impacted by an emergency event. This may be due to exposure to media coverage, the stress/anxiety of the adults in their world and/or knowing someone who was directly impacted by the event.

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