

# Helping Children to Cope During a Disaster

A crisis such as flood, fire, or tornado is a frightening experience for everyone, but for young children it can be extremely threatening. They do not have the ability to cope with the situation that an adult has. An extra amount of understanding and patience is usually necessary. Try to keep these points in mind when caring for children when a disaster occurs.

Heed suggestions or public warnings for the care and safety of your children. Awareness of possible problems and quick action may prevent many difficulties. For example, if there is a warning to evacuate or shelter-in-place, respond immediately, especially if young children are involved, to avoid a sense of panic due to last second decisions.

Remember that children mirror their parents' anxieties. Your agitation or calmness is reflected in their fear or coping.

Tell children simply and matter-of-factly about the problem and how it is to be handled. This helps avoid the fear of the unknown often sensed by children in unusual situations.

Take something familiar or have a “go-bag” for them to take into a new situation. This helps a child feel more secure.

Involve children in sharing action taken, no matter how small. They need and want to carry out important roles. This helps them feel a part of the family and prepares them to cope with later situations.

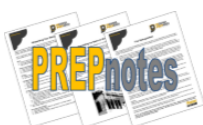
In a crisis situation a child may exhibit unusually childish behavior. For example, a boy of five or six may need to sit on his mother's lap or want to be cuddled. This is normal for a child who is scared and who doesn't understand a situation as serious as a flood or wild fire.

Children are sometimes punished for not behaving seriously. Most children are not capable of understanding the magnitude and severity of emergency situation. They need more understanding and patience at this time.

If your child's behavior appears unusual, he or she may have lost something, maybe a pet or a favorite toy. Ask regardless of age, what he or she is missing. Discuss their feelings and if possible try to replace the lost belonging. This is where a “go-bag” for each child might be helpful.

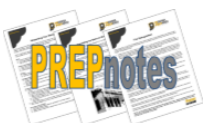
Sometimes it is necessary to leave children with a relative or friend for a time. These suggestions may be helpful in helping children adjust to your absence and being away from home:

1. Let your children know how long you will be away.
2. Let them know how often you will be in touch with them.



3. Try not to let them know you will be away until you are sure about where both you and they are going to be staying. This will prevent them from worrying or brooding over the absence.
4. Keep in touch with your children frequently, and as regularly as you promised. This will lessen the unsettledness of your being away.

Finally, keep track of your children to be sure they are provided for. You know their needs more than anyone else.



*PREPnotes are adapted from the "Disaster Handbook for Extension Agents". Reviewed and updated January 2020. Additional sources cited as appropriate.*