



NYU Child Study Center
Giving Children Back Their Childhood

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Helping Children Cope with the Effects of Hurricane Katrina: Tips for Parents and Other Caregivers

prepared by the staff of the NYU Child Study Center

Following a tragedy like Hurricane Katrina or other natural disasters, children often feel confused and upset. In the aftermath of such events, children typically look towards adults for information and guidance on how to react. It is extremely important for parents and caregivers to help children reestablish a sense of safety and security. Other guidelines for dealing with children in the days and weeks following a traumatic event include:

- Avoid appearing anxious or overwhelmed. Children are affected by their caregivers' moods. Staying calm will help children feel calm.
 - Reassure children that they are safe and that adults and other professionals are working very hard to protect them.
 - Talk to them about the event. Help them understand what has happened in language that is age appropriate.
 - Express the emotions that you are feeling. This will help children to understand and be able to express their own emotions.
 - Encourage children to talk about what they are feeling and what they have heard.
 - Be honest in your answers to questions and use language children can understand. If it seems to a child that you are holding something back they will likely be reluctant to ask for help in the future.
 - Maintain as much routine as possible; keeping things familiar keeps things comfortable. Spend more time with children following a trauma. This will help calm children and help them feel secure.
 - Help children find ways to relax and calm themselves. For children, playing can naturally reduce stress. In addition, many children find that exercise, listening to music, or taking a warm bath helps themselves to relax. Other techniques can include deep breathing or focusing on pleasant thoughts or images.
 - Limit children's viewing of television coverage about the event. Watching television coverage can re-traumatize children. Young children may believe that the event is happening again and older children can easily become overwhelmed.
 - Don't be surprised if a child's mood fluctuates or if they become clingier. Respond by letting youngsters know that you are there for them physically and emotionally.
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- Take care of yourself. You will be better able to support your children if you are

monitoring your own stress levels and getting the support that you need. Talking to friends, family members, clergy, and professionals can help you sort out your own feelings and models effective coping strategies for children. Make sure that you get plenty of rest, nutrition, and exercise.

Caregivers of children who experienced Hurricane Katrina first hand should be on the alert for the following behaviors and should contact mental health personnel if the following behaviors present themselves. These behaviors include:

- Long term denial and/or avoidance of the traumatic event; lack of recognized response to the trauma
- Extended periods of depression (loss of interest in activities, feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, inability to experience moments of joy, profound emptiness)
- Vague and generalized feelings of guilt and depression
- Persisting anxiety about the traumatic event
- Inability to respond to comfort and rejection of support
- Purposeful withdrawal from friends, loss of sociability
- Sleep or appetite problems, unusual loss or gain of weight
- Prolonged rather than transient physical complaints
- Acting younger for a prolonged period
- Destructive outbursts
- Inappropriate euphoria
- Accident-proneness
- Inappropriate/illegal behavior
- Decline in school performance, refusal to attend school
- Excessive grief

List adapted from [Caring for Kids After Trauma, Disaster and Death: A Guide for Parents and Professionals, 2nd Ed.](#) (65 pages, PDF)

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