Parent Tips for Helping Infants and Toddlers after Disasters

If Your Child	Understand	Ways to Help
. . has problems sleeping, doesn't want to go to bed, won't sleep alone, wakes up at night screaming.	▪ When children are scared, they want to be with people who help them feel safe, and they worry when you are not together. ▪ If you were separated during the disaster, going to bed alone may remind your child of that separation. ▪ Bedtime is a time for remembering because we are not busy doing other things. Children often dream about things they fear and can be scared of going to sleep.	▪ If you want, let your child sleep with you. Let him know this is just for now. ▪ Have a bedtime routine: a story, a prayer, cuddle time. Tell him the routine (every day), so he knows what to expect. ▪ Hold him and tell him that he is safe, that you are there and will not leave. Understand that he is not being difficult on purpose. This may take time, but when he feels safer, he will sleep better.
. . worries something bad will happen to you. (You may also have worries like this.)	▪ It is natural to have fears like this after being in danger. ▪ These fears may be even stronger if your child was separated from loved ones during the disaster.	▪ Remind your child and yourself that right now you are safe. ▪ If you are not safe, talk about how you are working to keep her safe. ▪ Make a plan for who would care for your child if something did happen to you. This may help you worry less. ▪ Do positive activities together to help her think about other things.
. . cries or complains whenever you leave him, even when you go to the bathroom. . . can't stand to be away from you.	▪ Children who cannot yet speak or say how they feel may show their fear by clinging or crying. ▪ Goodbyes may remind your child of any separation you had related to the disaster. ▪ Children's bodies react to separations (stomach sinks, heart beats faster). Something inside says, "Oh no, I can't lose her." ▪ Your child is not trying to manipulate or control you. He is scared. ▪ He may also get scared when other people (not just you) leave. Goodbyes make him scared.	▪ Try to stay with your child and avoid separations right now. ▪ For brief separations (store, bathroom), help your child by naming his feelings and linking them to what he has been through. Let him know you love him and that this goodbye is different, you'll be back soon. "You're so scared. You don't want me to go because last time I was gone you didn't know where I was. This is different, and I'll be right back." ▪ For longer separations, have him stay with familiar people, tell him where you are going and why, and when you will come back. Let him know you will think about him. Leave a photo or something of yours and call if you can. When you come back, tell him you missed him, thought about him, and did come back. You will need to say this over and over.
. . has problems eating, eats too much or refuses food.	▪ Stress affects your child in different ways, including her appetite. ▪ Eating healthfully is important, but focusing too much on eating can cause stress and tension in your relationship.	▪ Relax. Usually, as your child's level of stress goes down, her eating habits will return to normal. Don't force your child to eat. ▪ Eat together and make meal times fun and relaxing. ▪ Keep healthy snacks around. Young children often eat on the go. ▪ If you are worried, or if your child loses a significant amount of weight, consult a pediatrician.

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. . is not able to do things he used to do (like use the potty). . . does not talk like he used to.	▪ Often when young children are stressed or scared, they temporarily lose abilities or skills they recently learned. ▪ This is the way young children tell us that they are not okay and need our help. ▪ Losing an ability after children have gained it (like starting to wet the bed again) can make them feel ashamed or embarrassed. Caregivers should be understanding and supportive. ▪ Your child is not doing this on purpose.	▪ Avoid criticism. It makes him worried that he'll never learn. ▪ Do not force your child. It creates a power struggle. ▪ Instead of focusing on the ability (like not using the potty), help your child feel understood, accepted, loved, and supported. ▪ As your child feels safer, he will recover the ability he lost.
. . is reckless, does dangerous things.	▪ It may seem strange, but when children feel unsafe, they often behave in unsafe ways. ▪ It is one way of saying, "I need you. Show me I'm important by keeping me safe."	▪ Keep her safe. Calmly go and get her and hold her if necessary. ▪ Let her know that what she is doing is unsafe, that she is important, and you wouldn't want anything to happen to her. ▪ Show her other more positive ways that she can have your attention.
. . is scared by things that did not scare her before.	▪ Young children believe their parents are all-powerful and can protect them from anything. This belief helps them feel safe. ▪ Because of what happened, this belief has been damaged, and without it, the world is a scarier place. ▪ Many things may remind your child of the disaster (rain, aftershocks, ambulances, people yelling, a scared look on your face), and will scare her. ▪ It is not your fault–it was the disaster.	▪ When your child is scared, talk to her about how you will keep her safe. ▪ If things remind your child of the disaster and cause her to worry that it is happening again, help her understand how what is happening now (like rain or aftershocks) is different from the disaster. ▪ If she talks about monsters, join her in chasing them out. "Go away, monster. Don't bother my baby. I'm going to tell the monster boo, and it will get scared and go away. Boo, boo." ▪ Your child is too young to understand and recognize how you did protect her, but remind yourself of the good things you did.
. . seems "hyper," can't sit still, and doesn't pay attention to anything.	▪ Fear can create nervous energy that stays in our bodies. ▪ Adults sometimes pace when worried. Young children run, jump, and fidget. ▪ When our minds are stuck on bad things, it is hard to pay attention to other things. ▪ Some children are naturally active.	▪ Help your child to recognize his feelings (fear, worry) and reassure your child that he is safe. ▪ Help your child get rid of nervous energy (stretching, running, sports, breathing deep and slow). ▪ Sit with him and do an activity you both enjoy (throw a ball, read books, play, draw). Even if he doesn't stop running around, this helps him. ▪ If your child is naturally active, focus on the positive. Think of all the energy he has to get things done, and find activities that fit his needs.
. . plays in a violent way. . . keeps talking about the disaster and the bad things he saw.	▪ Young children often talk through play. Violent play can be their way of telling us how crazy things were or are, and how they feel inside. ▪ When your child talks about what happened, strong feelings may come up both for you and your child (fear, sadness, anger).	▪ If you can tolerate it, listen to your child when he "talks." ▪ As your child plays, notice the feelings he has and help him by naming feelings and being there to support him (hold him, soothe him). ▪ If he gets overly upset, spaces out, or he plays out the same upsetting scene, help him calm down, help him feel safe, and consider getting professional help.

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. .is now very demanding and controlling. . . seems "stubborn" insisting that things be done her way.	▪ Between the age of 18 months to 3 years, young children often seem "controlling." ▪ It can be annoying, but it is a normal part of growing up and helps them learn that they are important and can make things happen. ▪ When children feel unsafe, they may become more controlling than usual. This is one way of dealing with fears. They are saying, "Things are so crazy I need control over something."	▪ Remember your child is not controlling or bad. This is normal, but may be worse right now because she feels unsafe. ▪ Let your child have control over small things. Give her choices over what she wears or eats, games you play, stories you read. If she has control over small things, it can make her feel better. Balance giving her choices and control with giving her structure and routines. She will feel unsafe if she "runs the show." ▪ Cheer her on as she tries new things. She can also feel more in control when she can put her shoes on, put a puzzle together, pour juice.
. . tantrums and is cranky. . .yells a lot – more than usual.	▪ Even before the disaster, your child may have had tantrums. They are a normal part of being little. It's frustrating when you can't do things and when you don't have the words to say what you want or need. ▪ Now, your child has a lot to be upset about (just like you) and may really need to cry and yell.	▪ Let him know you understand how hard this is for him. "Thing are really bad right now. It's been so scary. We don't have your toys or TV, and you're mad." ▪ Tolerate tantrums more than you usually would, and respond with love rather than discipline. You might not normally do this, but things are not normal. If he cries or yells, stay with him and let him know you are there for him. Reasonable limits should be set if tantrums become frequent or are extreme.
. . hits you.	▪ For children, hitting is a way of expressing anger. ▪ When children can hit adults they feel unsafe. It's scary to be able to hit someone who's supposed to protect you. ▪ Hitting can also come from seeing other people hit each other.	▪ Each time your child hits, let her know that this is not okay. Hold her hands, so she can't hit, have her sit down. Say something like, "It's not okay to hit, it's not safe. When you hit, you are going to need to sit down." ▪ If she is old enough, give her the words to use or tell her what she needs to do. Tell her, "Use your words. Say, I want that toy." ▪ Help her express anger in other ways (play, talk, draw). ▪ If you are having conflict with other adults, try to work it out in private, away from where your child can see or hear you. If needed, talk with a friend or professional about your feelings.
. . says "Go away, I hate you!" . . says "This is all your fault."	▪ The real problem is the disaster and everything that followed, but your child is too little to fully understand that. ▪ When things go wrong, young children often get mad at their parents because they believe they should have stopped it from happening. ▪ You are not to blame, but now is not the time to defend yourself. Your child needs you.	▪ Remember what your child has been through. He doesn't mean everything he is saying; he's angry and dealing with so many difficult feelings. ▪ Support your child's feeling of anger, but gently redirect the anger towards the disaster. "You are really mad. Lots of bad things have happened. I'm mad too. I really wish it didn't happen, but even mommies can't make hurricanes not happen. It's so hard for both of us."

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. . doesn't want to play or do anything. . . seems to not really have any feelings (happy or sad).	▪ Your child needs you. So much has happened and he may be feeling sad and overwhelmed. ▪ When children are stressed, some yell and others shut down. Both need their loved ones.	▪ Sit by your child and keep him close. Let him know you care. ▪ If you can, give words to his feelings. Let him know it's okay to feel sad, mad, or worried. "It seems like you don't want to do anything. I wonder if you are sad. It's okay to be sad. I will stay with you." ▪ Try to do things with your child, anything he might like (read a book, sing, play together).
. . cries a lot.	▪ Your family may have experienced difficult changes because of the disaster, and it is natural that your child is sad. ▪ When you let your child feel sad and provide her with comfort, you help your child even if she remains sad. ▪ If you have strong feelings of sadness, it may be good for you to get support. Your child's well-being is connected to your well-being.	▪ Allow your child to express feelings of sadness. ▪ Help your child name her feelings and understand why she may feel that way. "I think you're sad. A lot of hard things have happened" ▪ Support your child by sitting with her and giving her extra attention. Spend special time together. ▪ Help your child feel hopeful about the future. Together think and talk about how your lives will continue and the good things you will do, like go for a walk, go to the park or zoo, play with friends. ▪ Take care of yourself.
. . misses people you are no longer able to see after the disaster.	▪ Even though young children do not always express how they feel, be aware that it is difficult for them when they lose contact with important people. ▪ If someone close to your child died, your child may show stronger reactions to the disaster. ▪ Young children do not understand death, and may think that the person can come back.	▪ For those that have moved away, help your child stay in touch in some way (for example, sending pictures or cards, calling). ▪ Help your child talk about these important people. Even when we are apart from people, we can still have positive feelings about them by remembering and talking about them. ▪ Acknowledge how hard it is to not be able to see people we care for. It is sad. ▪ Where someone has died, answer your child's questions simply and honestly. When strong reactions last longer than two weeks, seek help from a professional.
. . misses things you have lost because of the disaster.	▪ When a disaster brings so much loss to a family and community, it is easy to lose sight of how much the loss of a toy or other important item (blanket) can mean to a child. ▪ Grieving for a toy is also your child's way of grieving for all you had before the disaster.	▪ Allow your child to express feelings of sadness. It is sad that your child lost her toy or blanket. ▪ If possible, try to find something that would replace the toy or blanket that would be acceptable and satisfying to your child. ▪ Distract your child with other activities.