Parent Tips for Helping Preschool-Age Children after Disasters

Reactions/Behavior	Responses	Examples of things to do and say
Helplessness and passivity: Young children know they can't protect themselves. In a disaster, they feel even more helpless. They want to know their parents will keep them safe. They might express this by being unusually quiet or agitated.	▪ Provide comfort, rest, food, water, and opportunities for play and drawing. ▪ Provide ways to turn spontaneous drawing or playing about traumatic events to something that would make them feel safer or better. ▪ Reassure your child that you and other grownups will protect them.	▪ Give your child more hugs, hand holding, or time in your lap. ▪ Make sure there is a special safe area for your child to play with proper supervision. ▪ In play, a four year old keeps having the blocks knocked down by hurricane winds. Asked, "Can you make it safe from the winds?" the child quickly builds a double block thick wall and says, "Winds won't get us now." A parent might respond with, "That wall sure is strong," and explain, "We're doing a lot of things to keep us safe."
General fearfulness: Young children may become more afraid of being alone, being in the bathroom, going to sleep, or otherwise separated from parents. Children want to believe that their parents can protect them in all situations and that other grownups, such as teachers or police officers, are there to help them.	▪ Be as calm as you can with your child. Try not to voice your own fears in front of your child. ▪ Help children regain confidence that you aren't leaving them and that you can protect them. ▪ Remind them that there are people working to keep families safe, and that your family can get more help if you need to. ▪ If you leave, reassure your children you will be back. Tell them a realistic time in words they understand, and be back on time. ▪ Give your child ways to communicate their fears to you.	▪ Be aware when you are on the phone or talking to others, that your child does not overhear you expressing fear. ▪ Say things such as, "We are safe from the earthquake now, and people are working hard to make sure we are okay." ▪ Say, "If you start feeling more scared, come and take my hand. Then I'll know you need to tell me something."
Confusion about the danger being over: Young children can overhear things from adults and older children, or see things on TV, or just imagine that it is happening all over again. They believe the danger is closer to home, even if it happened further away.	▪ Give simple, repeated explanations as needed, even every day. Make sure they understand the words you are using. ▪ Find out what other words or explanations they have heard and clarify inaccuracies. ▪ If you are at some distance from the danger, it is important to tell your child that the danger is not near you.	▪ Continue to explain to your child that the disaster has passed and that you are away from the danger ▪ Draw, or show on a map, how far away you are from the disaster area, and that where you are is safe. "See? The disaster was way over there, and we're way over here in this safe place."
Returning to earlier behaviors: Thumb sucking, bed-wetting, baby-talk, needing to be in your lap.	▪ Remain neutral or matter-of-fact, as best you can, as these earlier behaviors may continue a while after the disaster.	▪ If your child starts bedwetting, change her clothes and linens without comment. Don't let anyone criticize or shame the child.

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Fears the disaster will return: When having reminders—seeing, hearing, or otherwise sensing something that reminds them of the disaster.	▪ Explain the difference between the event and reminders of the event. ▪ Protect children from things that will remind them as best you can.	▪ "Even though it's raining, that doesn't mean the hurricane is happening again. A rainstorm is smaller and can't wreck stuff like a hurricane can." ▪ Keep your child from television, radio, and computer stories of the disaster that can trigger fears of it happening again.
Not talking: Being silent or having difficulty saying what is bothering them.	▪ Put common feelings into words, such as anger, sadness, and worry about the safety of parents, friends, and siblings. ▪ Do not force them to talk, but let them know they can talk to you any time.	▪ Draw simple "happy faces" for different feelings on paper plates. Tell a brief story about each one, such as, "Remember when the water came into the house and you had a worried face like this?" ▪ Say something like, "Children can feel really sad when their home is damaged." ▪ Provide art or play materials to help them express themselves. Then use feeling words to check out how they felt. "This is a really scary picture. Were you scared when you saw the water?"
Sleep problems: Fear of being alone at night, sleeping alone, waking up afraid, having bad dreams.	▪ Reassure your child that he is safe. Spend extra quiet time together at bedtime. ▪ Let the child sleep with a dim light on or sleep with you for a limited time. ▪ Some might need an explanation of the difference between dreams and real life.	▪ Provide calming activities before bedtime. Tell a favorite story with a comforting theme. ▪ At bedtime say, "You can sleep with us tonight, but tomorrow you'll sleep in your own bed." ▪ "Bad dreams come from our thoughts inside about being scared, not from real things happening."
Not understanding about death: Preschool age children don't understand that death is not reversible. They have "magical thinking" and might believe their thoughts caused the death. The loss of a pet may be very hard on a child.	▪ Give an age-appropriate consistent explanation–that does not give false hopes–about the reality of death. ▪ Don't minimize feelings over a loss of a pet or a special toy. ▪ Take cues from what your child seems to want to know. Answer simply and ask if he has any more questions.	▪ Allow children to participate in cultural and religious grieving rituals. ▪ Help them find their own way to say goodbye by drawing a happy memory or lighting a candle or saying a prayer for the deceased. ▪ "No, Pepper won't be back, but we can think about him and talk about him and remember what a silly doggy he was." ▪ "The firefighter said no one could save Pepper and it wasn't your fault. I know you miss him very much."