



Prevent Child Abuse
Louisiana

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Helping Kids Cope With a Hurricane:



What Parents Can Do



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Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and their aftermaths, have caused many people to feel overwhelmed, confused and helpless – even children. As adults and parents, we all have a role in helping children to deal with the crisis and making them feel safe.

For many people, a crisis like a hurricane can cause physical and emotional stress. And the threat of other disasters and the continuing aftermath only add to the distress. Some people get in a bad mood or become sad; others lose sleep or have nightmares. Still others deny their feelings.

Just as adults, children also need to express their emotions and fears after a traumatic experience. However, children have not yet developed the coping skills needed to handle a natural disaster, and may have trouble putting into words how they are feeling. They must rely on adults to help them deal with trauma.

Children react to trauma in different ways. Talk with them about how they're feeling and give them extra hugs. Reassure them that they're safe.

Children react to trauma in different ways. You may see them return to behaviors they have outgrown. You may also see changes in their eating and sleeping patterns, or notice that they develop speech difficulties. Some kids may have unexplained aches or pains or develop new fears, like being afraid of strangers, animals, darkness or monsters.

Children may also be afraid of leaving home, being without you,



or going to school. They may cling to you and need more attention. But remember, they often can't put their feelings into words. You may see your child acting in ways that are disobedient and disruptive, hyperactive, aggressive or withdrawn. Many children behave this way because they need extra attention during a stressful time. Talk with them about how they're feeling and give them extra hugs. Reassure them that they're safe.

In general, it's good to maintain a normal household routine. For some children, however, temporarily reducing expectations about

Source: The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Helping Your Kids Cope in Times of Crisis

How can you help your kids deal with tough situations and make them feel safe in times of crisis? Children are exposed to traumatic events like Hurricanes Katrina and Rita through television, radio, newspapers, magazines and even adult conversations that they overhear.

The information can be scary to kids and they often need help managing what they've seen or heard. When you start talking with your children, you help them handle their feelings and you start a recovery of your own.

More than anything, children need to be assured that things will work out and be okay. They will seek comfort in knowing that their parents, families, police, firefighters, faith organizations, doctors and nurses, and others care and are there to help and support the victims. When your child sees media coverage about a disaster, emphasize that many people are trained to help people and handle emergencies.

How do you reassure your child? Here are some ideas, from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, on how to help kids cope in times of crisis:

Talk about the events. Ask your children what they know about the disaster, how it makes them feel, and what their concerns are. Communicate with them in a way they can understand, without getting too technical or complicated. Encourage your children to say what is on their minds and answer their questions when you can. It is okay to admit that you can't answer all of their questions about the natural disaster.

Children need to continue to talk with you; one or two conversations usually sets the stage for on-going questions and concerns.

Offer comfort. Let your child know that it's okay after a disaster to feel scared about his own safety or sad about what has happened. Reassure him that sad feelings will get better as time goes by. Offer comfort even if your child doesn't voice his fears out loud.

Help children understand that there are no bad emotions and that a wide range of reactions is normal.

Respond in a positive way. In speaking to your child, try to understand how she is feeling without making judgments. For instance, you might say, "Tell me what you're feeling," or "What you're saying is important to me. Let's talk about it." Try not to say things like, "Stop complaining," or "You should be over it by now."

Reinforce the fact that most people are kind and caring. Remind your

child of the heroic actions taken by ordinary people to help victims.

Help children find ways to express themselves.

Writing a poem or drawing a picture can help your child express her feelings. Children can make cards to send to rescue workers to thank them for their hard work. Talk with your children about courage and let them know that police and community leaders are working to keep people safe.

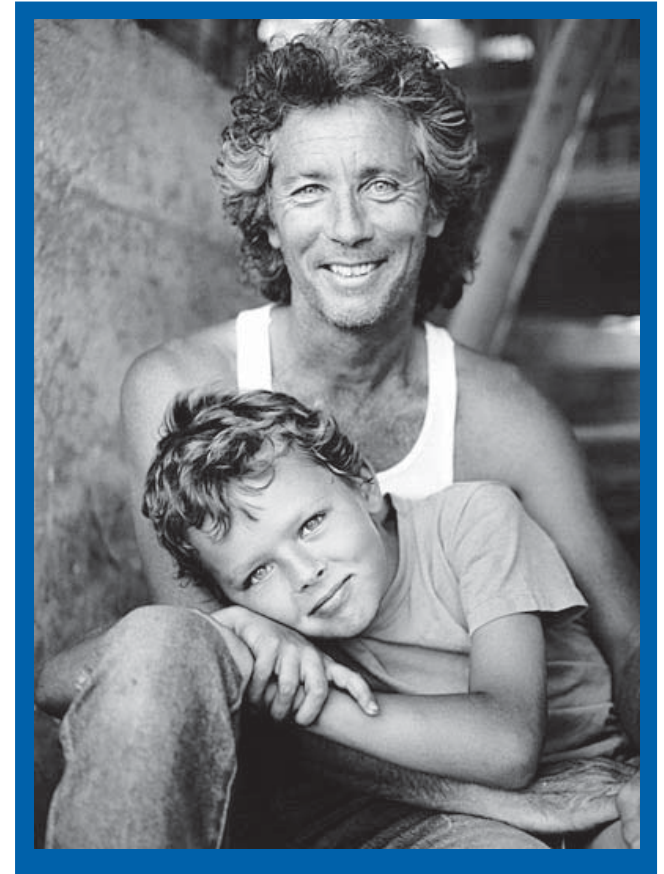
Pay attention. Your children's play and drawings may give you a glimpse

into their questions or concerns. Ask them to tell you what is going on in the game or the picture. It's an opportunity to clarify any misconceptions, answer questions and give reassurance.

Join with your neighbors in the relief effort. Speak with your child's teachers, coaches or other caregivers to learn about relief efforts in your community. See if there is anything you can do to help.

Volunteer together. To provide goods and services to people in need, organizations need help from people. Money is not the only way to donate. Take some time out after school and work so that you and your children can help.

Surround children with people they love. If possible, now is a good

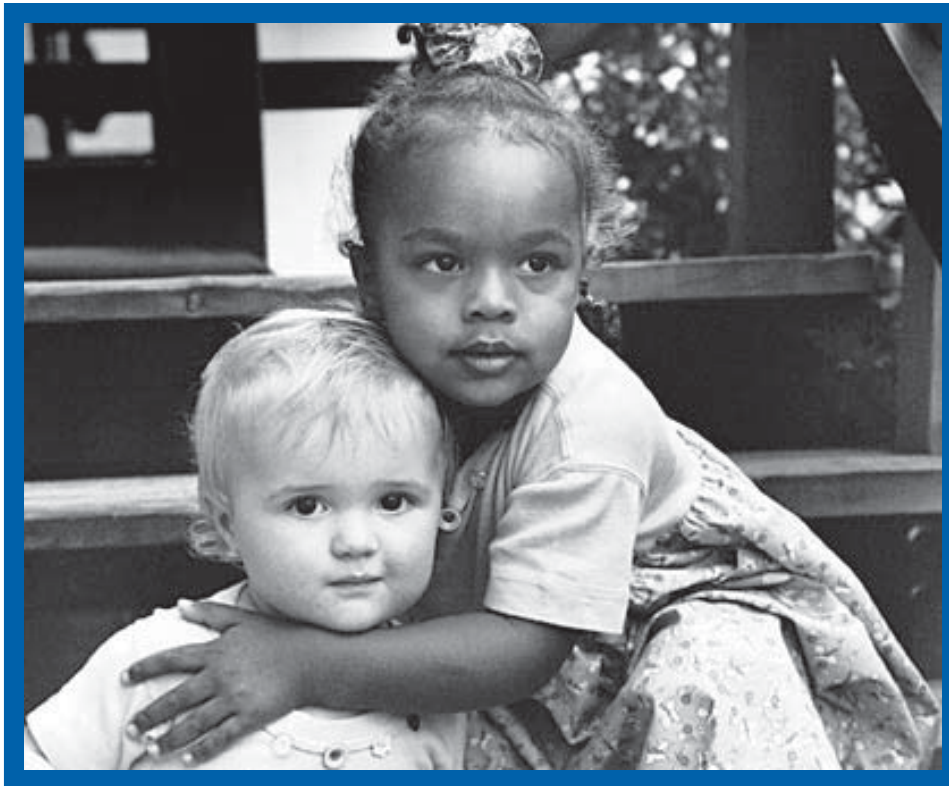


time to be with family and close friends. Creating a safe and caring environment can be the best thing for your kids in times of crisis, fear and anxiety.

Turn off the TV and radio. Try to reduce your children's media access, especially when tragic events are played over and over. Letting your kids see minute-to-minute coverage will only upset them and add to their anxiety and stress.

In addition to the tragic things they see, help children identify good things, such as heroic actions, families who are grateful for being reunited and the assistance offered by people throughout the country and the world.

Develop a plan. For those not directly affected by Katrina or Rita, now is a good time to establish a family emergency plan for the future, such as a meeting place where everyone should gather if something unexpected happens in your family or neighborhood. It can help you and your children feel safer.



What Else Can Be Done for Children?

For children closer to the disaster scene, more active interventions may be required.

- The family as a unit might consider counseling. Disasters often reawake a child's fear of loss of parents (*frequently their greatest fear*) at a time when parents may be pre-occupied with their own practical and emotional difficulties.
- Families may choose to permit temporary regressive behavior. Several arrangements may help children separate gradually after the agreed-upon time limit: spending extra time with parents immediately before bedtime, leaving the child's bedroom door slightly ajar and using a nightlight.
- Many parents have their own fears of leaving of a child alone after a disaster or other fears they may be unable to acknowledge. Parents often are more able to seek help on the children's behalf and may, in fact, use the children's problems as a way of asking for help for themselves and other family members.

Crises like Hurricanes Katrina and Rita affect everyone and will continue to do so for quite some time. Seek help if you or your children are feeling overwhelmed or unable to cope. It's important that you and your family maintain your long-term health and well-being so that you can continue to help one another and care for victims of the hurricanes.

Source: *The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*