



College of Agriculture, Human and Natural Sciences

Disaster Education Response Team



How to Talk to Kids about Disasters

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We live in a global society. Our world seems smaller each year as our ability to see and hear of events across the planet increases. Sometimes, disasters that don't seem to have a direct impact on our lives can have a profound effect on children—even when they happen far away.

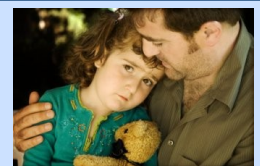
• How distant disasters can impact children

- Disasters may threaten a child's sense of security.
 - Children think in terms of how things affect them, and may worry that it could happen to them or someone they love.
- Disasters may change a child's view of the world.
 - Disasters make the world seem like a dangerous and scary place. Children may become more fearful or distrustful.
- Disasters may make a child feel powerless.
 - Children may think: "If adults couldn't stop this disaster from happening, what could *I* possibly do to keep my family and myself safe? How can *I* possibly help?"

• Talking to young children

- Young children have fairly limited exposure to news. They do, however, pick up on things that their parents and older siblings watch and discuss while they are around.
- Don't be afraid to talk with children about disasters. This is the way they learn about the world. Simplifying the event will make it easier for the child to understand.
- Limit their exposure to potentially traumatic images. They may not understand what is going on in the picture or video and it may create more anxiety for them.
- Since children are very concrete thinkers, it's best to relate the event to something they have directly experienced.

**Remember when our pipe burst and we had a big mess?
The people in that town had water everywhere
in their houses and yards.**

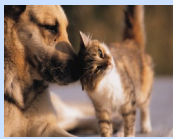


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- **Talking to children in middle childhood**

- Children in middle childhood are beginning to think more about the wider world. They want to understand more. Encouraging this curiosity will help kids become more engaged in society and develop their critical thinking skills.
- Children often have an idealistic view of how to solve problems. It's good to encourage their interest, but you may have to help them come up with more realistic contributions.
- Educate yourself about events. Never make something up if you don't know the answer. Instead, take the opportunity to learn with your child.
- You may need to explore your own biased views about certain events, places or people. Children will pick up on even unsaid feelings as they form their own beliefs.



We can't adopt all the pets left homeless from the tornado but we can collect pet food donations and make cat toys for them to play with.

- **Talking to adolescents**

- Adolescents have much more independent access to information about events.
- It is important to check in with them and have conversations to see what they're thinking about. They may have incorrect information or be making assumptions that need corrected.
- Since adolescents have access to information about disasters and other misfortune, many may start to feel helpless and hopeless. Taking action can help.
- Adolescents often go through a period where they disconnect from other's issues and become more focused on themselves. Raising issues that others are experiencing can help them put their issues into perspective.
- These children will soon be adults. This is the perfect time to get them involved in thinking on a large scale and brainstorming of ways they can make a difference in their world.

- **A teaching opportunity?**

- Although disasters are tragic and create hardships, one silver lining may be the opportunity to teach children.
 - Parents can model compassion and teach children how to empathize with others who are experiencing a painful time.
 - This is also a good time to help children appreciate what they have and recognize what they may take for granted.
 - By taking action to help those affected by the disaster, parents can empower children. There are many things, big and small, that people of any age can do to help in most cases.



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