



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 we have the ability to see and hear of events across the planet in great detail. Sometimes, disasters that don't seem to have a direct impact on our lives can have a profound effect on children—even things that happen far away.

- **How distant disasters can impact children**

- They may threaten their sense of security
Children think in terms of how things affect them. They may worry that it could happen to them or someone they love next.

- They may change their view of the world.
Disasters make the world seem like a dangerous and scary place. Children may become more fearful or more distrustful.

- They may make them feel powerless.
Children may think: "If adults could not stop the disaster from happening, what could I possibly do to keep my family and me 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 you watch and discuss while they are around.
- Talk with them about disasters. This is the way they learn about the world. Simplifying the event will make it more understandable to the child.
- Limit the images they see. 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 is 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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Disaster Education Resources.
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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.
- Often kids have a very 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. You can learn about things with your child, but never make something up if you don't know the answer.
- You may need to explore your own biases about certain events, places or people. Children will pick up on even unsaid feelings and it will impact their 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 they do have access to all the misfortune going on, many adolescents start to feel helpless and hopeless. 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 own 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.

- **An 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 do have and recognize what they take for granted.
- By taking action to help those experiencing the disaster, parents can help 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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