

## **Helping our Children Cope with Natural Disasters**

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We live in an unpredictable world, as demonstrated by our recent epic flooding. Children are most vulnerable to the emotional effects of natural disasters as it threatens their belief that as parents we can keep them safe at all times. Unfortunately, we cannot, but we can help them understand and cope with how they are feeling.

Once safety is secured, then the job of helping a child deal with their emotional response begins. To simplify, we can assist children in coping with natural disasters by using three steps.

#### **Communication:**

- Calmly communicate that you are okay – children look to parents for stability.
- Reassure your child that feeling afraid is normal.
- Provide extra hugs and affection.
- Encourage talking, drawing or writing about their feelings.
- Allow your child to tell their story.
- Limit exposure to media coverage.

#### **Teach them to cope:**

- Get a routine going again (such as eating together). We all do better once we re-establish routine in chaos.
- Let them help- allow them to take part in knowing they can improve a situation

- Listen to soothing music, read relaxing stories, teach them how to relax their bodies with deep breathing and age appropriate meditation (apps for this exist!) or download any number of childhood stress management programs.
- Teach them stress management – although you want to acknowledge the struggle, encourage children to think positive thoughts. Each evening have them journal something good that happened that day, what made them laugh or smile, or how they were helpful to others.
- Encourage relaxing play such as drawing, coloring, watching a favorite, familiar movie.
- Once things are calm, discuss possible future safety plans to help children gain a sense of control.

#### **Take advantage of resources:**

- Parents need to get their own support so that they may be able to provide support for their children.
- Accept help if offered, those less affected feel useful when allowed to help.
- If your child starts to struggle, reach out to a school counselor, pastor or teacher.
- Consider professional help If your child has sustained problems with withdrawal, nightmares, poor appetite, panic, sleep difficulties, new fears that escalate, or multiple physical complaints such as headaches and stomachaches.

The above approaches help children in natural disaster by normalizing their feelings and reactions, processing their emotions, managing their stress, and enhancing their coping skills. As parents we can help our children cope with the stress of situations that are beyond our control.