

WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN DURING NATURAL DISASTERS

In a situation of great uncertainty and an emergency, it is normal to experience a range of emotions such as helplessness, anxiety, exhaustion, and sadness, with increased worries. Therefore, it is important to prioritize the well-being of both children and adults.

Children often find it more difficult to express their feelings or do so differently than adults. Like adults, children can experience fear and insecurity, but they may not always be able to articulate their worries.

Sometimes, a child's distress is manifested in changed behavior, such as a heightened need for attention and reassurance in various situations, not just those related to the emergency.

For instance, they may become more agitated or less active, experience nightmares, become more tearful, and become more dependent on adults. These symptoms may appear immediately for some children, while for others, it may take longer. Therefore, it's important for parents to do their best to remain calm, discuss things in a balanced manner, and pay attention to specific aspects during and after an emergency. We have compiled 10 things that are essential to keep in mind, and you can find a detailed description of each one on the back page.

- 1. Try to maintain some routines and stability.**
- 2. Engage in open communication.**
- 3. Provide reassurance.**
- 4. Create a safe/comfortable space in the temporary living space.**
- 5. Engage in play and distraction.**
- 6. Monitor media exposure.**
- 7. Stay informed.**
- 8. Establish a support network.**
- 9. Prepare yourself and your family for potential changes.**
- 10. Seek professional support if necessary.**

Remember, each child is unique, and parents should customize their approach based on the individual needs and ages of their children. It's important to recognize that it's perfectly normal not to be able to handle everything perfectly, especially when parents are dealing with difficult emotions and worries during such challenging times. Parents are encouraged to be gentle and patient with both themselves and their children. It's advisable to follow these guidelines to the best of their ability given the circumstances and seek support from relatives who may not live in the disaster area. Parents also need to take care of themselves, making it easier for them to be there for their children.

1. Try to maintain some routines and stability

Try to maintain a daily routine as much as possible. Familiar activities can give children a sense of normalcy during difficult times. Routines can be small or large, both are important. Examples of larger routines include going to school, sleep, nutrition, and exercise, while small routines might be something like the Friday pizza or the Saturday movie night.

2. Have open communication

Encourage open communication with your children. Allow them to express their feelings and concerns. Create a safe space where they feel comfortable sharing their experiences. Avoid assuming you know their concerns; it's good to ask open-ended questions and respond based on their age and maturity. It's okay to say "I don't know" but it can be helpful to follow up with "I'll look into it" or "the adults will look into it and keep you informed" and "it will be alright."

3. Provide reassurance

Reassure your children that their safety is a top priority. Explain the steps being taken to ensure their well-being. Reassuringly share what has been done and what lies ahead in terms of help or plans. Be honest but provide information in a way that is age-appropriate. It's important to maintain a positive tone when communicating. Remind them that various systems, including scientists, the Red Cross, ministries, and health professionals, are working hard to help or provide answers to questions you may not have.

4. Create a safe/comfortable area

Designate a specific area in the temporary housing as a "safe zone" or even a "cozy zone" where children can retreat when emotions run high. This can be a place with familiar toys, books, blankets, or anything else that reminds them of home and evokes a sense of security or comfort.

5. Engage in play and distraction

Encourage children to engage in age-appropriate play and activities to distract them from stressful situations. Play can also be a way to navigate and process emotions.

6. Monitor media exposure

Limit your children's exposure to media coverage, especially graphic images or alarming news. Constant exposure to distressing information can increase anxiety and fear in children. While it's not necessary to shield them completely, it's recommended to minimize exposure. They are likely to notice and feel insecure if something is obviously being hidden from them. Be honest that it's not healthy to hear too much about the situation, and assure them that you, as parents, will provide news updates or watch the news with them. Also, discuss what they see on social media and address any concerns if necessary.

7. Stay informed

Stay informed of the current situation and updates from relevant authorities. Being aware of the situation can help parents make informed decisions about their family's safety.

8. Establish a support network

Connect with other parents and families in similar situations. Building a support network can provide a sense of community, solidarity and shared understanding. Sharing experiences and advice can be important when facing difficulties. Additionally, having a support network of people and supporters who are not in the same situation can be beneficial. Seeking help with both major and minor issues is important during emergency situations.

9. Prepare yourself and your family for potential changes

Prepare children for potential changes in their circumstances. Discuss the possibility of a long-term stay in the temporary place and involve them in planning and adapting to the new situation. Be mindful of their age and abilities, allowing them to contribute ideas or have some control (however trivial) over the situation without taking on additional responsibilities or concerns.

10. Seek professional support if necessary

Consider talking to mental health professionals or counselors who specialize in trauma and disaster response. They can provide additional support for children and parents.