

STEP #4: KNOW WHAT TO DO CHILDREN AND DISASTERS

Children's disaster-related fears and anxieties are very real to them.

Young Children

Young children do not express their fears verbally but through their behaviour.

Changes in behaviour may include:

- Nail biting.
- Bed wetting.
- Thumb sucking.
- Rocking or holding onto a blanket or toy.
- Clinging behaviours, nightmares, refusing to sleep.
- Screaming, shaking, crying.

How parents can help

- Take their fears seriously.
- Comfort young children with physical care, holding and hugging.
- Encourage children to express themselves through play or drawing.
- Keep the family together as much as possible.
- Include the children in recovery activities.
- Give children information that they can understand.
- Relax rules but maintain family structure and responsibilities.

Adolescents

In disasters, adolescents can sometimes be involved in rescue and this may compound their level of trauma. They are survivors and also rescuers, until more organized help arrives. Frequently, they are exposed as witnesses to injury and death, as well as the physical devastation of their community.

Reactions may include:

- Withdrawal, isolation, or depression
- Feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, worthlessness
- Academic failures
- Sleep disturbances, headaches, loss of appetite

Ways to Help

- Involving teens in clean-up activities
- Assisting the elderly with errands
- Babysitting for families busy with rebuilding activities
- Organizing play activities for younger children
- Peer counseling, teen call-in phone line
- Social activities such as dances, athletics, etc.

During an emergency situation, it is important to remember that your child looks to you for guidance and comfort.

Remember:

- Children follow their parents' lead - the calmer you are, the calmer they will be.
- It is important to talk to them openly and honestly about what is happening. Try to explain the nature of the problem in a way they will understand, and what is being done to correct it.
- Never dismiss their fears or anxieties.

- You should try to monitor what they watch on television. News coverage of certain emergency situations can be distressing for children.
- You can reassure them by explaining that everything is under control and they will be safe.
- If you must evacuate, bring a toy along (or a favourite board game); this may help to keep them occupied and provide them with additional comfort.
 - If you practice family evacuation drills regularly and talk about why you're doing it, children will not be as frightened by it because there will be some familiarity. An evacuation will be made that much easier if children have practiced the routine.