

When Disaster Strikes

During and after a disaster children experience a variety of reactions and feelings that are both age related and universal. We all feel anxious, confused, frightened and helpless because of our inability to protect our loved ones and ourselves. Keep in mind that children's feelings are real...if a child feels afraid, he is afraid. Our desire to protect them should not involve avoidance or the assumption that they are too young to understand or feel intensely. Every bit of experience that I have had with children and disaster tells me that they are very aware; and it must be our goal as parents and caring adults to help them avoid a permanent sense of loss or vulnerability.

Children need an age appropriate response that includes –

Physical comforting - i.e. lots of hugs and attention

Encouraging expressions of loss, or fear, or anger in play and conversation

Opportunities to gain accurate, simple explanations of the danger

Discussions of, and enactment, of safety measures being taken to avoid future occurrences

Empowerment, or the opportunity to master and heal by becoming constructive helpers in the face of tragedy.

Keep in mind that children's fantasies, magical thinking and sometimes guilt are often more potent than the reality they are experiencing, even in a disaster. They may need repeated explanations and opportunities to play or make up stories of mastery, particularly in the face of overwhelming circumstances.

Most importantly, children need to know that they are loved and that their security is our ardent concern. If they can be allowed, in fact encouraged, to help in the process of recovery they will not only learn an important "adult" lesson, but will be empowered by the experience.

My "kids" truly believe that handing out teddy bears to others were the "happiest days of their lives".