

Helping Children Cope with Emergencies

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When we lived in Utah, our family dealt with such conditions as blizzards, high winds, a flood, and a mud slide. After living in California several years, we or our neighboring communities experienced flooding, fires, and earthquakes. From these emergencies I learned some important lessons that may help other families cope with a disaster.

1. Accept your own and your family's limitations. Disasters tend to create a lot of anxiety and push people to the limit of their endurance. To help everyone cope better, reassure and comfort victims often—especially children. Eat regularly if possible, and rest when needed. Accept help that is offered, both emotional and physical.

2. Children can be easily overwhelmed by a disaster and may experience difficulty in coping. Common behaviors noted in children who experience a severe earthquake include fear, anger, sleeplessness, nightmares, loss of appetite, fatigue, irritability, and impaired concentration. When our family suffered through an earthquake, we were surprised to find that even our older children experienced separation anxiety and childlike dependence and were initially too shocked, dazed, and fearful to help out, which was frustrating to my husband and me. Such signs of stress should not be met with demands, overconcern, or punishment. Calm, positive reassurance is more effective.

3. Limit the amount of news coverage you watch or hear. We found that having constant news coverage, unless strictly necessary, increased our anxiety and heightened our fear. With the news turned off, our family calmed down, began to talk about what had happened, and started working together.

4. People often need to talk about upsetting or dangerous experiences. You can help by being a reassuring, understanding listener. Children will sometimes talk about the disaster for months afterwards. However, after a reasonable length of time, it can be beneficial to divert children's attention to another subject so they don't fixate on the disaster.

5. As soon as children are able to help, include them in recovery activities. Doing something positive will help them feel good and get their mind off their fear. Resume normal activities as soon as reasonably possible. This helps children feel that life will return to normal.

6. Keep the family together as much as possible. Children may be afraid to be separated because they fear the event will recur, a loved one will be seriously hurt, and that they will be left alone.

7. Watch your own reactions to the emergency. Your response communicates to children the seriousness of the problem. If parents become distraught, children are likely to become even more frightened. Children take comfort when adults appear to be in control and know what to do. If anyone becomes hysterical, take that person somewhere private until he or she calms down, because hysteria can cause a chain reaction and unnerve others barely hanging on.

8. Remember to spiritually nourish your family with prayer, priesthood blessings, and scripture reading. Often exercising faith through these means can bring a spirit of peace and hope into otherwise trying circumstances.—Arlene Anderson Butler, Ogden, Utah