

Talking With Children About Natural Disasters
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The effects of Hurricane Katrina, Hurricane Rita, and other natural disasters will be felt by young children in the affected areas for a long time to come. Try to clear up any confusion children might have and answer their questions with sensitivity.

Reports of natural disasters can spark an excessive fear for family safety in some young children. Listen for comments or questions from the children in your program about what's going on. The best way to find out what they have heard is to listen for any fears or worries expressed directly, through drawings, or through play. It's important to listen to each child carefully and tailor discussions to each little one's worries. When responding, consider not only the child's age but also how sensitive or easily scared she is in general.

Younger children (under age 8) have trouble distinguishing make-believe from reality, especially since they see both on TV. Some images can be frightening and seem extremely close to home, even if they are actually far away. Discourage parents from watching these events on television when their children are awake.

If a child seems afraid as a result of having seen these images, acknowledge her very real fears and reassure her that she and the rest of her family are safe. Explain that natural disasters are rare and that there is very little chance that your town will be affected by a similar event. Answer questions honestly, calmly, and clearly, but don't go into unnecessary detail.

Tips for Teachers

(1) Children may have questions about the disaster that you don't know the answers to. Respond by saying, "That's an interesting question. Let's find the answer together." Then, use your school or classroom library and/or the Internet to explore and research the answer.

(2) Take advantage of the opportunity to use children's awareness of natural disasters, war, and violence as a springboard into larger topics, including the environment, tolerance, and non-violent options for resolving conflicts.

(3) Use your classroom globe or map to locate areas that are discussed and point out how far away they are. You can use these situations as an opportunity to help children learn more about natural events in different parts of the country.

(4) Be ready to discuss any of these topics again for those children who show concern.

Lending a Helping Hand

Hurricane recovery is a long-term effort. Here are some organizations and efforts that your school community may want to get involved with:

(1) In September, Scholastic partnered with Habitat for Humanity and NBC to build homes for families as part of the hurricane recovery effort. This effort is ongoing and the organization needs your support. You can donate to Habitat for Humanity's reconstruction project or volunteer to join a reconstruction crew at www.habitat.org.

(2) The March of Dimes, an organization that supplies pregnant women and babies with supplies and hospital care, is taking monetary donations at www.marchofdimes.com.

(3) Learn more about how to help the victims cope with trauma, encourage your senators and representatives to take action to help Katrina and Rita victims, and donate to the Zero to Three special hurricane fund at: www.zerotothree.org.

(4) To offer housing (a spare bed, extra room, comfortable couch) to displaced hurricane victims, log on to www.moveon.org.

(5) Donate food, money, or time to America's Second Harvest food drive at www.secondharvest.org.

(6) Donate money, food, clothing, medical, bathroom, or baby supplies to the National Foster Parents Association at www.nfpainc.org.

Resources

(1) American Academy of Pediatrics: www.aap.org/terrorism/index.html

(2) American Psychological Association: www.apa.org

(3) Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Violence and Disasters, from The National Institute of Mental Health at www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/violence.cfm

(4) Talking with Children About War and Violence in the World, from Educators for Social Responsibility at www.esrnational.org/guide.htm