



UNIVERSITY BEHAVIORAL HEALTHCARE – BEHAVIORAL RESEARCH AND TRAINING INSTITUTE

TRAUMATIC LOSS COALITIONS FOR YOUTH

Helping Children Cope in the Aftermath of Hurricane Irene

Hurricane Irene was one of the worst storms to hit New Jersey in decades. Being in the path of a powerful storm with an unpredictable outcome elicits a great deal of anxiety in the days before the storm hits, as well as while it is in progress

Dealing with the aftermath brings yet another set of stresses. Lives were lost and many of us felt affected as we read the stories about the people who died. We empathize with their loved ones and we are all left a bit uneasy as we realize these kinds of tragedies can happen to anyone. Thousands of people were evacuated and many are still displaced because their homes were too badly damaged to inhabit. Many people lost their possessions in the related flooding and are left to deal with the grueling physical and emotional stress of a major cleanup and huge financial burdens.

For some individuals, the timing of Hurricane Irene, just prior to the ten year anniversary of the 9/11 attacks and the 6 year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, brought added feelings of vulnerability.

Children and youth are not immune to the stresses caused by natural disasters. Their age and prior experiences, the presence of other life stressors, as well as how their parents are feeling and reacting will determine their reaction and overall functioning.

Some children may have been quite worried by the warnings and predictions in the days prior to the hurricane. They may have become frightened by the noise of the wind and rain and the rising waters around their home. Some children who lost their homes and were displaced and those that came back to heavily damaged homes are left without their predictable environment, possessions and routines.

Adding to this, children are returning to school to begin another academic year. Some kindergartners will be starting the “big” school for the first time. A new school year can be fraught with uneasiness in the best of times as children adjust to a new teacher, new classmates and new learning material. Children who have been impacted by the hurricane may be coming back with worries and anxieties that can impede their ability to learn and process information and may negatively affect their behavior in the classroom.

Many schools have been impacted and the physical environment, comforts, schedules and routines that children and youth rely on may be compromised. Many teachers in hard hit communities are dealing with the same difficult post hurricane challenges as are parents and caregivers.

In trying to get their homes and lives back together, important adults are often understandably less physically and emotionally available to children. Parents, caregivers and teachers may neglect their own health and need for rest and support from other adults to focus on the needs of children and youth. This can lead to fatigue, irritability, increased arguing with spouses, and less patience with the more challenging behaviors of children and youth.

There is much that can be done to help children and youth through the process of recovery. The most important adults in a child’s life can be instrumental in facilitating healthy adjustment in the weeks and months following the hurricane.

Provided here are some guidelines to assist parents, caregivers and teachers understand what some children and youth may be experiencing and ways to help them cope in the aftermath.

Possible Fears

- Worrying that another hurricane will hit. This is especially true during hurricane season when many storms begin to take shape far out at sea and weather stations and media begin to track them and report on their possible paths.
- Fear triggered by subsequent rain storms. Children may worry that the rain means another hurricane or flood is coming.
- Fear that home, schools and neighborhoods will never be the same.

Possible Reactions

- Young children may experience the following:
 - behaviors previously outgrown such as thumb sucking and bedwetting
 - nightmares
 - increased crying
 - excessive clinging to parents and caregivers
 - changes in appetite
 - tantrums
- Older children and teens may experience:
 - increased sensitivity to sounds such as wind and rain
 - nightmares and fears of sleeping alone in their room
 - difficulty concentrating and a decrease in school performance
 - continued focus on the hurricane including asking lots of questions or playing out scenes depicting wind, rain, flooding, or people drowning
 - physical complaints such as stomach aches and headaches
 - eating disturbances
 - irritability and increased arguing or fighting
 - withdrawal from friends or favorite activities
 - risk taking in teens including increased substance use and driving recklessly

Guidelines for Parents and Teachers

- First rule: Take care of yourself!
 - During times of worry and anxiety, it is often very difficult to take care of all of the duties of parenting. Ask friends or family members to help out by taking children for play dates or transporting them to school or after school activities.
 - Although it may be difficult, try to make sure you are getting adequate rest, eating well and drinking lots of water to keep your body nourished and hydrated.
 - Avoid spending long hours engaged in strenuous clean up or rebuilding activities
 - If unable to sleep, contact your doctor to discuss ways of helping you get the rest you need.
 - If you feel very upset and unable to cope, talk through your feelings with other adults. Seek help from trusted family members, friends or a member of the clergy.
 - School administrators can arrange for crisis intervention for staff members. It is important not to use counselors who are struggling with post hurricane issues themselves. Counselors providing this service should have the opportunity to receive caregiver support. This can be accomplished by bringing in offsite counselors not seriously affected by the hurricane.

- While the reactions below may be normal during this very stressful time, if you find they are increasing, seek out assistance from a mental health professional.
 - Disrupted sleep and appetite
 - Increased irritability or anger
 - Increased physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach problems, nervousness, muscle weakness or feeling very tired
 - Feeling like you can't think straight or remember things
 - Withdrawing from others
 - Starting or increasing alcohol or drug use
 - Feeling hopeless or having thoughts of hurting or killing yourself

Seek help immediately if you find yourself thinking about or planning suicide.

1-800-273-TALK is an important resource if you are feeling suicidal.

Helping Children and Youth

- Remain calm and reassuring. If you are hopeful about the future, children will be as well.
- Maintain a regular routine including mealtime, bedtime and play time.
- Listen to a child or youth's questions and fears and take them seriously while reassuring them as truthfully as you can. Remember, young children feel more vulnerable than adults because of their size and limited life experience. Their fears may seem silly or groundless to adults but may cause significant distress for the child.
- Encourage children and youth to communicate their feelings and experiences and then listen and listen some more. Remember, there are many ways to communicate feelings other than talking including: writing poems, stories, songs, drawing, etc.
- Validate a child or youth's feelings: "I am hearing how hard this is for you" can be a very powerful statement to someone who is upset.
- Teachers along with school counselors can lead classroom discussions focusing on students' experiences with the hurricane, how they are coping, and to answer any questions or concerns. This can help build support networks among the students and also assist adults in identifying youth who may be struggling and in need of additional assistance.
- Ask children and youth to talk about the people and things that have helped them through tough times in the past.
- Ask them to identify all of the trusted adults in their life they would go to if they were frightened, upset or worried. This helps them remember they are not alone.
- Ask them to talk about things they have learned about themselves as they are going through this challenging time.
- Have children work in small groups on school projects to strengthen peer connections.
- Expect that children who were very affected may have difficulty concentrating and keeping up with schoolwork and respond to their needs accordingly.
- Talk about family and school plans for various emergencies. Explain what children and youth should do to stay safe. This will help them feel less worried and more in control.
- Increase playful, life affirming activities at home and in school.
- Watch for symptoms of distress that don't lessen (see "Behaviors to Watch For" section below), and refer children and youth who are struggling for appropriate assistance.

Additional Guidelines for Schools

These guidelines were adapted from the **National Association of School Psychologists** (www.nasponline.org/) **“Helping Children After a Natural Disaster: Information for Parents and Teachers.”**

- Determine the status of every child in the school. Contact each child who is absent and keep a record. Identify the needs of children whose homes were destroyed or damaged.
- Develop an advisory committee of students to report back to school staff about what resources and changes in routines will help students cope.
- Help connect families to community resources. In hard hit communities with limited transportation, arrange for agencies or disaster personnel to come into the school to help families deal with needs related to housing, finances, and insurance. Ensure that children get any necessary medical and emotional assistance.
- Provide parents and caregivers with names and numbers of school counselors who can assist them. Create a list of community agencies and local mental health providers along with contact information in case more intensive services are needed.
- Incorporate information about the disaster into related subject areas, as appropriate. Science, math, history, and language arts are especially relevant.

Behaviors to Watch For

The following reactions can be normal for children and youth in the days and weeks following a traumatic event. If these reactions are not getting better or are increasing, it can be an indication the child or youth is in need of additional assistance. School counselors and administrators can help guide parents to resources in the community.

- Physical complaints (i.e., headaches, stomach aches, muscle pain and fatigue)
- Increased fears of various kinds including separation from caregivers
- Difficulty concentrating and decrease in school performance
- Continued preoccupation with the hurricane that can be observed in drawings, writings, play
- Upsetting images the child can't get out of their mind
- Withdrawal
- Nervousness and irritability
- Increased anger and aggression
- Being afraid to separate from parents even for a short time
- Reverting back to younger behaviors
- Sleep disturbances including difficulty falling or staying asleep and nightmares
- Eating disturbances including loss of appetite or eating much more than usual

Behaviors listed below are serious and need to be addressed immediately by a mental health professional

- Engaging in risk taking behaviors including reckless driving or substances abuse
- Self-injurious behavior such as non-suicidal cutting
- Suicidal thoughts or attempts