

ANSWERING CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS ABOUT NATURAL DISASTERS



Bright Horizons.

Early Education & Preschool

Children need our views about life, the natural world, and social issues articulated in language they are developmentally able to understand. They observe not just what we say but what we do. How and what we teach our children depends on who we are: our civic nature; our spirituality; and our willingness to learn about events, respond with compassion and generosity, and pass that empathy on to our children.

ANSWERING QUESTIONS ABOUT NATURAL DISASTERS

What is a hurricane?

For preschool children: Hurricanes are big storms with lots of rain and really strong winds. Sometimes everything gets flooded and lots of things get knocked down. We will need to go to a safe place or get away from the storm. We can get ready ahead of time to be safe.

For older children: A hurricane is a powerful tropical storm that comes in from the ocean and brings lots of rain, lightning, and very high whirling winds of 75 to 180 miles an hour (as fast as a race car). They are also called tropical cyclones or typhoons and they get their energy from warm tropical water before they head to land, which is called making landfall. Hurricanes often cause flooding and tornadoes. They hit the Caribbean islands, the East and Gulf coasts of the United States, the Far East, the Pacific islands, India, Japan, and Northern Australia. In the United States, hurricane season is from June to November.

Hurricanes happen every year when the surface waters are warmest; some are much stronger than others. Hurricanes are more destructive in the United States today than 50 years ago. 41

Today, there are more people living in low-lying coastal areas where hurricanes do the most damage. And wetlands, which work like a sponge and help reduce a hurricane's power, have been replaced by development. These changes may be increasing hurricanes' potential damage.

Hurricanes are predictable and can be tracked. Families and communities can prepare for hurricanes to make sure that no one gets hurt and property is protected. Some families don't have as many resources to do this and may be more vulnerable. There are organizations working to help those families. Our family will make sure that we are prepared for the next one.

What is a flood?

For preschool children: Floods are when there is too much water and it covers everything.

For older children: A flood is when lots of water flows into a dry area. Too much rain causes rivers, streams, or lakes to overflow their banks and flood surrounding areas. High ocean levels and high waves can also cause a flood. Sometimes, the structures used to control flooding such as dams, levees, or floodwalls break and the water released floods an area. A flash flood happens all of a sudden after a sudden rain.

Floods usually take time to develop, and the location can be predicted and planned for. Floods also happen when water flows downhill due to gravity. People who live in areas where flooding is common can be careful and plan to escape when floods are likely.

What is a tornado?

For preschool children: Tornadoes are very strong storms with winds that can knock down anything. They are called “twisters” because the wind twists and twirls around. When there are tornado warnings, everyone needs to go to the place that keeps them safe, usually a basement or a room with no windows.

For older children: Tornadoes form from thunderclouds and are the most powerful storms for their size. They have very fast swirling, twisting, sucking winds of up to 300 miles an hour (almost as fast as a jet). Unlike hurricanes, which swirl outward, tornadoes or twisters swirl inward and rotate around a funnel of low pressure. They look like upside-down cones. Tornadoes usually move above the Earth’s surface at 35 to 50 miles per hour (mph) but can go up to 70 mph. When they touch down, they can suck up and destroy everything in their path, such as trees, trucks, bridges, houses and other buildings, and even farm animals. A tornado’s path may be a mile or two or up to hundreds of miles. Most tornadoes in the United States strike in April, May, and June.

Tornadoes develop quickly out of a storm, and sometimes there is little warning that a storm has developed twisters. But people can be safe by listening for warning sirens and radio or television announcements, as well as having a safe place identified to quickly go to if a tornado is in the area.

What is an earthquake?

For preschool children: An earthquake is when the ground starts shaking. The shaking may shatter buildings or break up roads. Or the ground may develop big cracks or holes. Many people are working to protect us from earthquakes and to help us be prepared.

For older children: The Earth is divided into three layers: the core, the mantle, and the crust. Deep in the middle is a solid metal core that is very hot and also an outer core that is liquid. The outer core is about 1,300 miles thick and the inner core is about 800 miles to the center of the Earth. Next is a layer of hot minerals, called the mantle, which is flexible like plastic. The top layer is called the crust. All the oceans and the land are the top of the crust. The crust is typically about 25 miles thick beneath continents and about 6½ miles thick beneath oceans. The crust is relatively light and brittle. Most earthquakes occur within the crust.

Under the crust are tectonic plates made out of rock. These plates move all the time, but so slowly we can't feel it. The breaks in between the plates are called faults. Sometimes, a plate rubs or bumps into another plate and this causes an earthquake. Earthquakes create shocks and aftershocks that can be large or small. We may not even notice all the small earthquakes, but large earthquakes have destroyed cities and killed thousands of people.

Scientists are working hard to learn more about how to predict earthquakes and warn people. They are also working on how to protect buildings and other structures so that they can reduce the damage to life and property.

What is a tsunami?

For preschool children: A tsunami is an earthquake that happens beneath the sea. The earthquake can cause a big wave to form that can come onto the land and cause floods.

For older children: A tsunami, or tidal wave, is a giant wave of water up to hundreds of feet high (as big as a large building) that rolls to the shore and knocks down and floods anything in its path. The bigger the tsunami, the farther the wave will reach onshore and flood more land. Scientists hope to find ways to give people in coastal areas more warning before a tsunami strikes so that they can move farther away and to higher areas.

What is a mudslide?

Mudslides happen when there is excessive rain or flooding on the sides of hills or mountains. The solid ground becomes mud and slides down the hill, taking trees, buildings, and everything else down the slope.

People who live on hills or steep slopes can plan to get out safely as the ground gets full of water, before the mud begins to slide down the hill.

What is a wildfire?

Wildfires are fires that cover a large area where there has been very little rain and all the trees and shrubs are dry. Wildfires can happen just as easily in housing developments as in forests. When the winds are strong, the fire can be carried by the wind and then destroy an even bigger area. Wildfires usually happen in late summer and fall in areas where rain is scarce. Terrible wildfires have happened in California, Australia, and other dry areas. They can start because of lightning, careless people who drop cigarettes or forget to put out campfires, or other reasons. They can last for days or even months.

We can know when fires are likely to happen, and families can work to protect their houses and prepare to flee to safety. Professionals are working on new tools and systems to prevent and respond to wildfires.

In the midst of any crisis, whether a violent attack or a natural disaster, everyone is scared, even the wonderful people who rescue others. Some were probably both scared and brave at the same time. Lots of people stayed scared for a long time and still have nightmares and scary thoughts. Police officers, firefighters, and soldiers all feel scared sometimes, too.

How can I feel better if I had to leave my home?

FEMA suggests that kids try to remember six things (slightly adapted from the original):

1. Disasters don't last very long. Soon, things will be back to normal, even if the normal is a little different than what it used to be.
2. You can get a new routine even if you can't go home for a while or never go back to the same home. You will settle down into a new place and you will meet new friends.
3. Look to your parents or other adults for help when you feel scared or confused. They will help you understand what is happening. Don't be afraid to ask questions.
4. Sometimes it helps to write about your experiences or to draw pictures about what has happened. You can describe what happened and how you feel.
5. It's OK to cry during a disaster, but remember, it will get better.
6. You may be able to help out. Children of all ages can help in the shelter by babysitting other children, cleaning up, or serving food. You can even help with sandbagging or cleaning up your house after a tornado, hurricane, or earthquake, or by creating care packages for those in need.

My mom (or dad, grandparent, friend, etc.) is really sad and not herself. Sometimes I think it is my fault. What can I do?

Even if you are not the perfect kid in a time of crisis, how your mom feels is not your fault! Adults can be overwhelmed and confused by their feelings sometimes, too. When it's a bad time for your mom, don't take it personally. Like usual — but maybe a little extra — try to be helpful. She has a lot on her mind and, like you, is feeling sad and trying to figure out what to do. She will get better and will keep you safe.

I miss my (relative, friend, pet). What can I do?

Remember all the good things about your pet. Draw some pictures, tell some stories, and let yourself cry. If your pet is separated from you or missing, don't give up hope that everything will work out. Remember that your pet loved you and you will always have special memories of your time together. It's OK to still talk to your pet or act out what you would say if your pet were still here.

MORE ON HELPING CHILDREN UNDERSTAND CRISIS AND CATASTROPHE

When crisis or catastrophe occurs, the most important work we can do after ensuring children's physical safety, is to be thoughtful and responsive to their emotional and educational needs. The family is a safe haven where children can express their ideas and fears with assurance that their parents will protect them and teach them about the world that they will inherit.

If a child's family does not provide this safe haven, it is important that other adults in their lives do. Most children have at least one caring adult in their lives, but it is the job of all of us to ensure they never have less than one.

Talking to Children About Crisis and Catastrophe

Many of the questions and concerns that surface in times of crisis have at their heart the fundamental questions:

- ▶ Will I be OK?
- ▶ Will you be OK?
- ▶ Will everyone I know and love be OK?
- ▶ Will the world that I know be OK?

Help the child:

Identify his or her own fears through gentle conversation that follows the child's lead. Ask the child what they wonder, what they think, what they imagine. Respect the child's fears and remember that fear is not always rational.

Always try to be realistic while reassuring the child that it is unlikely the catastrophe will happen again the same way. Assure the child that if there is a next time, "We will be ready" (even if you are not feeling entirely sure yourself).

In the aftermath of a crisis or catastrophe, children will have a range of reactions. If they have been in harm's way or vulnerable, their wariness, fear, and anxiety will likely increase. If they have only heard about it, they may be curious and even seem cavalier in response. Alternately, they may feel empathy and sorrow for the people who are experiencing it. Some of their reaction depends on how the adults around them are responding.

Young children have limitations in how they can respond to and process emotions, and a spectrum of reactions is normal. The comforting, thoughtful presence of an adult helps dispel young children's fears. Older children also rely on the strong presence of adults and their rationality and optimism.

In these circumstances, children need to hear that:

- ▶ People are working very hard to learn more about early warnings of natural disasters or violent attacks and ways to prevent loss of life and damage to society.
- ▶ As a family or school community, we will devise plans to be prepared and safe.
- ▶ I am always here for you and will do everything I can to protect you.

ANSWERING CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS

Children need our best answers, or our honest lack of an answer. Sometimes all we can say is, "Bad things sometimes happen without a reason, but we will always do everything we can to protect ourselves so the chance of a bad thing happening is smaller." Use examples from your own life that they can understand, such as wearing a seat belt to protect themselves in case there is an accident or cutting up food in small bites to avoid choking. Children need our thoughtfulness and willingness to help them seek answers. No child will ever thank us for lying or avoiding questions.

Before Talking to Children

Even if we only have a moment to think about what to say and how to say it, try to remember to:

Get your own feelings and thoughts straight. Have another adult listen to you first if you aren't sure you are ready to talk to a child. Try to be your most thoughtful, calm, and emotionally stable self when you talk to children. Be prepared for the inevitable difficult questions about what bad things could happen to us, why people die, and why some people live. Think not only about what you want to say, but also about how you want it to come across. Watch your words, tone, and body language. You may give a nonverbal message of sadness, anger, confusion, fear, or indifference.

Clarify. Ask children what they think the words that they are using or hearing mean: death, drowning, loss, weather, disaster, hurricane, looter, hero, terrorist, victim, refugee. Understand what your child already knows and feel before beginning any dialogue by asking, "What are you thinking and feeling?"

Observe. Find natural opportunities to ask what's on the child's mind and follow his or her lead. Recognize the clues in a child's art, play, or conversations with friends. Accept his or her feelings. Read thoughtfully chosen picture books to support children's understanding.

Check first before assuming either a lack of or strong interest. When you encourage a young child to draw, play, or talk about his or her feelings, you give permission to freely express scary or angry thoughts.

Use emotional self-regulation. Honestly share your feelings, but always try to be in control of your emotions in the presence of your children.

Be strong in a crisis even when feeling sad, scared, confused, or angry. The child needs to draw upon your strength, not take care of you. Demonstrate resilience and optimism.

Offer physical comfort. Provide the child hope by simply sharing hugs or reassuring smiles that say "I'm here for you and we will make it through this."

Adapt your response to a child's developmental level and needs. While a young child may need to hear, "Lots of strong, smart people are working hard to keep us safe," an older child may need to help you plan what to do or help research efforts to prevent natural disasters.

Monitor and limit children's exposure to media coverage of disasters and crises. Children have not seen much of life or weathered many storms and can easily feel that everything, everyone, everywhere is coming apart. The quantity and intensity of television, radio, and newspaper coverage, as well as adult conversations during a crisis, can easily frighten children, and adults should try to manage those images.

Offer additional context. Consider that natural disasters such as hurricanes and tsunamis will spark an interest in environmental concerns as well as issues of poverty and race for older children. Respect the growing ability of school-age children and teenagers to understand and discuss issues openly and honestly.

Stay tuned in. Keep listening, asking, conversing with, and reassuring children as their thoughts and feelings evolve. Remember that every child is different. The explanation of national, global, or personal events needs to match the child's developmental understanding and personality. Don't give more information than the child is ready for.

Protect children's idealism. Children are born idealists: The world is a good place where nature is usually friendly and predictable, people are mostly good, and life is worth living. Sudden exposure to catastrophe or violence tests their idealism and optimism as well as our own. If children are exposed to too much of life's dark side, they may lose their sense of optimism and start to experience toxic stress.

Stay alert to signs of stereotyping and racism. In times of conflict or exposure to societal issues, "us versus them" mentalities, ethnic and social class stereotypes, and contempt for behaviors different from our own may lead to racism and cultural bias. In times of crisis, we can inadvertently make harmful assumptions about groups of people and make false correlations. Though often unintentional, this can cause damaging, lasting effects. More than ever, we need to teach children to accept and respect cultural and social groups different from theirs and see the good in other people. Children need us to model tolerance, respect for diversity, and an interest in learning about other people, cultures, and countries. In every conversation, work toward greater understanding across ethnic, cultural, and social class lines. Be your best as a human being.

Honor children's need to have some control and find ways for them to contribute. Our sense of power is restored by taking steps to improve our own current situation or to increase our preparedness for future situations. Finding ways to connect with others in the community and around the world to show our common humanity has the same result. Younger children can draw thank-you pictures for police officers and help pack a natural disaster survival kit. Older children may also want to help create a family emergency plan, communicate with a pen pal, or collect donations.

Challenge assumptions and overgeneralizations. Older children and teens are cultivating their worldviews. This matures over time, but is heavily influenced by their early experiences and by adult perspectives and opinions. Without a broad context, they readily and unconsciously integrate what they observe and hear. Help them develop a conscientious and curious approach to learning about the world by modeling these characteristics yourself, especially when it's hardest to do. For example, if a group of people from one country or religion commits a terror attack, it is important not to generalize that all from that country or religion are bad or evil.