

Children and the Aftermath of Katrina: From fear to hope

In the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, many children will be hiding under the covers. When tragedies such as Katrina strike, children, like many of us adults, have no way to understand the unimaginable. It is normal to be frightened of life threatening events.

Also like us adults, children do best with certainty, predictability and stability in their lives. Tragedy however, turns those elements upside down and chaos often reigns. A consequence of chaos is powerlessness – that sickening sense that you are unable to effect any change in circumstances whatsoever for the better. After powerlessness comes either anger or depression and sometimes both, then despair.

Children, particularly young children, will gain their sense of safety and security first from their parents and secondly from other adults. They will look to our reactions to help them interpret their own and then they will look to be comforted by us.

The challenge for parents and adults in view of the needs of children is to manage our negative reactions such that they do not spill over on the children. This is not to say that parents or other adults hide their reactions, but only share them in such a way as to say to children that their fears are reasonable, but we will do our best to protect you from harm. This legitimizes their experience, yet provides a positive future orientation that all will be well in time – with patience.

To help children cope, consider the following:

1. As best as possible, try to limit re-traumatization. Shelter children from ongoing horrific images that only contribute to fear, turmoil and upset. Limit exposure to graphic news stories and hold adult conversations out of earshot of the children.
2. Find a way to provide structure. Two elements of structure are routine and activity. The activity may relate to the routine such as preparing food for mealtime. Routines and activities help regain

a sense of control when all else feels out of control.

3. Listen to their fears and acknowledge them, but remain reassuring. Children experience the same feelings as adults, so it is important and reasonable to validate their feelings while all the while keeping a positive future orientation.
4. Do good deeds, however small, by helping others. In addition to being an activity, doing good deeds helps overcome the sense of powerlessness and cascade of negative emotions. It empowers children and adults alike and is a potent antidote to powerlessness.

Lastly, hold your children tight and continue to give hugs and kisses. As reassuring as it is for the kids, it works for us parents too. As we comfort and take care of our children, we take care of our worst fears and ourselves. We need to know our children are safe and free from harm.

As we concentrate on the needs of our children, we re-focus in the aftermath of tragedy and find purpose and meaning for our existence.

Concentrating on the needs of our children organizes our activity thus providing structure. The good deeds we do in participation with our children help us while helping others. This in turn protects us from fear and leads to hope... and hope is the key ingredient to overcome the most horrible of tragedy while helping our children.

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