

Hurricane Tips: Children and Stress

Hurricane season can be a very stressful time for all Floridians, especially children. Stress and reactions to stress are a natural response to any disaster. It's important for all family members to know how to react in an emergency, because when a disaster strikes, the best protection is knowing what to do. The following are some ideas for helping your children be prepared in case a hurricane approaches your area. There are also tips for dealing with some of children's fears about hurricanes. Children's fears can stem from their imaginations. It is important to take their feelings seriously. Words and actions can provide reassurance to a child who feels afraid. When talking to your child, be sure to present a realistic picture that is both honest and understandable.

Before the Hurricane

The following suggestions will serve as guidelines to help you prepare for a hurricane or other disaster:

- Talk with your children about the dangers of disasters that are likely in your area and how to prepare for each type. Make sure they know where to go in your home to stay safe during a tornado, hurricane or other disasters likely for your area.
- Go through steps for safety, show them the most protected areas of the house where they can wait out the storm, etc.
- Explain to children how and when to call for help. Keep emergency phone numbers where family members can find them.
- Agree on a meeting place away from your home (a neighbor or relative's house or other location) where you would get together if you were separated in an emergency. Give each family member an emergency list with the name, address and phone number of the meeting place. For children who are old enough help them to memorize the person's name, address and phone number.
- Put together a disaster supplies kit for your family, and children can help develop the family disaster plan. They can make their own plan for things that are important to them, such as how they will occupy themselves without electricity and how they will contact friends post disaster.
- Allowing children to participate in the planning prior to a hurricane makes them feel useful and more confident.

- Provide a child with their own flashlight; this will help as a comfort and security measure.

Coping Techniques

Understand that children may not be able to verbalize their fears and anxieties, and will naturally look to their parents or caregivers for reassurance. They will take their cues on how to act or react from an adult caregiver, the more assured they are the faster they overcome anxieties.

One of the biggest fears children have is that of being left alone. Try to include them in planning and listen to children who are afraid. Do not minimize their fears or feelings; understand that they will need reassurance and attention. It's okay to let children know that you are afraid too. By sharing your feelings it shows that you are hearing what they are saying and that you understand. You may need to repeat over and over the same answer; this provides a reassuring pattern that children need in stressful times. Encourage children to talk and verbalize their fears. This creates an atmosphere of understanding and acceptance. Encourage young children to draw pictures to express their feelings.

After the Hurricane

Stress reactions may appear in your children days, weeks, or even months after a hurricane or disaster. This is a normal part of coping and recovery for a child. If the symptoms last longer than two weeks and are intense, professional help should be arranged.

Get back into a routine as quickly as possible. Scheduled meal times, bedtime, and play times tell children that a sense of normalcy is back and things are under control. It provides for a sense of security and often revitalizes a family.

Common signs and symptoms of stress in children are:

- Persistent fears, such as being left alone, the dark, strangers, loud noises, and weather
- Regressive behavior like sucking their thumb, wetting their pants when they are potty trained, and excessive crying.
- Sadness
- Nightmares

- Disobedience in the extreme
- Inability to concentrate or sleep

If you are concerned about the mental well being of your child please contact your child's health care provider.

For more information:

For Families of Children with Special Needs

<http://www.fifionline.org/images/PDF%20Files/Planning.PDF>

Call the Family Health Line 1-800-451-2229

State of Florida

www.myflorida.com

Florida Department of Health: County Health Departments

www.doh.state.fl.us/chdsitelist.htm

Florida Division of Emergency Management

www.floridadisaster.org

American Red Cross

www.redcross.org

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

www.fema.gov

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)

www.noaa.gov

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

www.ready.gov

www.whitehouse.gov/homeland

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

www.cdc.gov

USDA Food Safety and Consumer Information

www.fsis.usda.gov/Food_Safety_Education/

National Flood Insurance Program

1-800-427-4661

March of Dimes

www.marchofdimes.com