

Parent Guidelines for Helping Children after a Tornado

Being in a tornado can be very frightening, and the days, weeks, and months following the storm can be very stressful. Most families recover over time, especially with the support of relatives, friends, and their community. But different families may have different experiences during and after a tornado, and how long it takes them to recover will depend on how frightening the tornado was and the extent of damage and loss. Some families will return to normal routines fairly quickly, while others may struggle with damage to their home and possessions, medical care, and financial strain. Some families may have lost a loved one or a pet. A family's recovery may also be strongly affected by school closings or changes in school schedules. Children may react differently to the tornado and its aftermath depending on their age, developmental level, and prior experiences. Parents should expect that different children may respond to events in different ways and be supportive and understanding of different reactions.

Children's reactions to the tornado and its aftermath are strongly influenced by how their parents, teachers, and other caregivers cope during and after the storm. They often turn to these adults for information, comfort, and help. There are many reactions to tornadoes and other frightening events that are common among children. These generally diminish with time, but knowing that these reactions are likely – and normal – can help parents be prepared.

Common Reactions

- Feelings of anxiety, fear, and worry about safety of self and others (including pets):
 - Children may have increased fears and worries about separation from family members
 - Young children may become more clingy to parents, siblings, or teachers
- Fears about another tornado coming
- Increased anxiety over future tornado warnings
- Changes in behavior:
 - Increased activity level
 - Decreased concentration and attention
 - Increased irritability
 - Withdrawal
 - Angry outbursts
 - Aggression
- Increased physical complaints (e.g., headaches, stomachaches, aches and pains)
- Changes in school performance
- Prolonged focus on the tornado (e.g., talking repeatedly about it – young children may “play” the event)

- Increased sensitivity to sounds (e.g., wind and other loud noises)
- Changes in sleep
- Changes in appetite
- Lack of interest in usual activities, including interest in playing with friends
- Regressive behaviors in young children (e.g., baby talk, bedwetting, tantrums)
- Increased chance of high-risk behaviors in adolescents (e.g., drinking, substance abuse, self-injurious behaviors)

How Can I Help My Child?

- Spend time talking with your child. This will let your child know that it is OK to ask questions and to express their concerns. Issues may need to be discussed more than one time. You should remain flexible and open to answering new questions and providing clarifications.
- Finding time to have these conversations is important. One way is to use family times (such as mealtimes) to talk about what is happening in the family as well as in the community. You should answer questions briefly and honestly, but also ask your children for their opinions and ideas about what is discussed. For younger children, try to follow tornado conversations with a favorite story or a family activity to help them feel more safe and calm.

Things I Can Do for Myself

- Take care of yourself. Make sure you take good physical care of yourself, including eating well, sleeping well, and receiving proper medical care.
- Listen to each other. Parents and other caregivers should provide support for each other during this time.
- Put off major decisions. Avoid making any unnecessary life-altering decisions during this stressful period.
- Give yourself a break. Try not to overdo clean-up activities. These activities may include lifting heavy items or working for extended periods of time. Using moderation when doing such work can reduce injury.

Things I Can Do for My Child

- Be a role model. Changes in living conditions can be extremely stressful for children. They will take cues of how to handle situations from their parents. Modeling calm behaviors will be important during chaotic times.
- Encourage your children. Help children help take care of themselves by encouraging them to get appropriate rest, exercise, and diet. Be sure there is a balance of quiet and physical activities.
- Reassure children that they are safe. This may need to be repeated many times following the tornado. You should spend extra time with your children and stay connected. It doesn't matter whether it's playing games outside, reading together indoors, or just cuddling. Be sure to tell children they are loved.

- Maintain routines. Even in the mist of chaos and change, children feel more safe and secure with structure and routine. As much as possible, stick to everyday routines (including mealtimes, bedtime, etc.).
- Maintain expectations. Stick with family rules, such as rules about good behavior and respect for others.
- Limit media exposure. It is important for you to protect your child from overexposure to sights and images of the tornado, including those in newspapers, on the Internet, or on television.
- Calm worries about friends' safety. As phone service may be disrupted, communication will be difficult. Reassure your children that their friends' parents are taking care of them just as they are being cared for by you.
- Communicate about community recovery. Reassure children that things are being done in their community to restore electricity and water, to remove debris, and to help families find permanent housing.
- Encourage children to help. Children recover and cope better when they feel they are helping. Find opportunities in which they can contribute in the aftermath of the tornado. Give small tasks related to clean-up or family activities. After children spend time in clean-up activities, provide activities that are not related to the tornado. This may include playing a game, reading a book, playing cards, etc.
- Reduce boredom. Many children may complain of boredom. Their daily activities such as watching television, playing on the computer, or playing with friends have been disrupted. Their extracurricular activities like sports, dance, etc. have been suspended. Helping children think of alternative activities during this time will be important. Try to find community programs that have child-friendly activities and games that your children can be involved in.
- Be patient. Children may need a little extra patience and attention during these times. They may need added reminders or extra help with chores or homework once school is in session as they may be more distracted.
- Give support at bedtime. Children may become anxious when they separate from their parents, in particular at bedtime. First try to spend more time with your child at bed time with such activities as reading a book. It's okay to make a temporary arrangement for young children to sleep with you, but with the understanding that they will go back to normal sleeping arrangements at a set future date.
- Monitor adult conversations. Be aware of what is being said during adult conversations about the tornado and its aftermath. Children may misinterpret what they hear and can be frightened unnecessarily about something they do not understand.
- Seek professional help. If children have difficulties for more than six weeks after the tornado, parents should consult a mental health professional for an evaluation.
- Keep things hopeful. Even in the most difficult situations, it is important to identify some positive aspect and to stay hopeful for the future. A positive and optimistic outlook helps children see the good things in the world around them. This outlook can be one way to help them get through even the most challenging times.

Further information about children, families, and tornadoes can be found at the website of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, www.NCTSN.org.