

BANANAS HANDOUT

Helping Children Respond To Disasters

The impact of any disaster is widespread. Even those not directly touched by the event are affected. The social fabric of the general community is altered and must be healed. Parents and child care providers are especially hard hit by the turmoil surrounding a disaster because they must provide comfort and stability to children at a time when they may be feeling overwhelmed and uncertain about the future. This Handout aims to assist parents and caregivers in responding to children in the wake of a catastrophe. Knowing ahead of time how children respond to disasters will help you feel prepared if or when another one occurs.

Children's Responses to Disaster

Many feelings and reactions are common and shared by people of all ages after a disaster. However, special attention is required in addressing the needs of children. During times of confusion, young children are particularly vulnerable to the disruption of their previously orderly world. Because they generally lack the verbal and conceptual skills necessary to cope effectively with sudden stress themselves, they look to family members and other adults for comfort. The fear of abandonment is a major fear for all children. Other typical reactions from children of any age include: fears of future disasters, loss of interest in school, sleep disturbances and night terrors, and fears of natural events associated with the disaster (i.e. sudden movement or noises may remind children of an earthquake). Young children (6 years old or under) may also experience one or more of the following: bed-wetting, crying, excessive clinging, thumbsucking, fear of darkness, fear of crowds, problems in eating and sleeping, irritability and confusion. Most of these symptoms can be diminished if parents or caregivers understand and remember the underlying causes of the behaviors and respond with liberal doses of attention, love and care.

Reactions to a disaster vary with both the age of the child and the child's individual temperament. These reactions may appear immediately after the disaster, or they may not arise for days, weeks or even several months. They can come and go depending on the circumstances of the child's life. Often these normal reactions are short-lived and soon disappear altogether. If children are developmentally robust and their basic relationships are in good shape, they will bounce back from a trauma. However, there may be cause for concern if disaster-related behavior doesn't diminish within a reasonable amount of time (i.e. if a

sleeping problem continues for more than a few weeks, if clinging behaviors do not recede, if fears become worse). When children have persistent difficulty in coping, it may be advisable to seek professional assistance. Children who have experienced acute or severe losses such as the actual loss of their home or the death of a family member will need special reassurance, help or counseling.

Respect the manner in which children choose to express themselves. Sometimes they will be most comfortable talking about stressful events in a descriptive, matter-of-fact fashion. At other times, children may want to act out a reaction rather than talk about it. It is not uncommon for children to express a wide range of emotions. For example, many children may be simultaneously fascinated by and fearful of a disaster. It may appear that they are trying to confront and to avoid a stressful situation at the same time. Any technique which helps children verbalize or act out their feelings of fear or sadness is beneficial.



During times of confusion, children look to adults (parents and other caregivers) for information about what is happening as well as for protection and reassurance. It is important for adults to provide clear information in a manner which fits each child's level of understanding. A ten year old will be able to absorb more details about a disaster than a three year old – but, they both need information. Children may not be able to discriminate between the disaster itself and its aftermath. For example, the noise and confusion which accompanies the rebuilding of homes after a fire may disturb or frighten some children. They need an explanation of why all those trucks are coming and going through the neighborhood and they need an understanding that this activity is necessary to return the area to normal. By providing information and reassurance (even if we ourselves don't feel entirely reassured), we can help children feel less fearful and more in control of their lives.

What Can Parents Do?:

Despite the disruption and stress of trauma, these events present an opportunity for children and their parents to interact in positive and powerful ways. When parents are able to react by grieving over losses and in time moving ahead, children receive a strong message on how to cope with adversity. In the future, the young children and other

members of the family can look back at the event and see it as something which happened and was successfully overcome. Here are some helpful hints for difficult times:

- Allow a child to talk about the disaster. Let him/her know that it is normal to feel worried and upset. Listen to what your child says and how s/he says it. Do you hear fear, insecurity, anger? Provide emotional labels for common reactions. *“You sound very angry when you talk about what happened.” “Your voice tells me you are sad when you think about”* It may be very helpful to restate your child’s words. *“You are afraid because people you know were hurt.”* Or *“You wonder if another disaster will happen soon.”* This helps clarify feelings for everyone. It is wise and necessary for adults to talk with children about a calamity. This gives children the opportunity to think through the event, to try to understand it and to be reassured that it is past.
- Talk with your child about your own feelings but do not burden him/her with adult worries and fears. Find other adults to discuss your concerns and anxieties with so you don’t put your child in the position of taking care of you.
- Reassure your child that the family is safe and together with phrases like *“It’s sad so many people lost their lives, but we are still together. I care about you and I will take care of you.”* You will probably need to repeat information and reassurances many times immediately after any disaster and again and again as time goes by. Once is not enough.
- Stick to usual routines as much as possible. Spend time together. If you feel too stressed to talk, simply being together is what matters. It is not important what you do.
- Hold and touch your child often. This provides needed physical comfort.
- Plan to spend extra time with your child at bedtime. S/he may need extra reassurance.
- Encourage expression through play. Listen to what is said and observe how the child plays. Children frequently express feelings of fear or anger while playing with dolls, trucks or friends. Play can be healing and therapeutic.
- Allow the child to mourn and grieve if s/he has lost a meaningful object (i.e. a blanket or stuffed animal). This is part of the process of helping a child learn to cope with her feelings about the disaster. In time, it may be helpful to replace the object.
- Let children know that life can be hard sometimes, that unexpected and scary things do happen, but that you as the parent are there to protect them and keep them safe.
- Allow children to have their fears and concerns. Some children become aggressive or otherwise “act out.” It is important to remember that while the behavior may be unacceptable and need to be redirected, the feelings

behind the behavior are appropriate and should be acknowledged.

- Protect children from the media barrage after a disaster. Repeated newscasts of the event may cause young children (and adults) to lose perspective on the true scope of the event.
- Take good care of yourself. A child’s ability to assimilate traumatic events is usually dependent on how well the parents and other caregivers cope with the events. Your well-being (or lack of it) will affect your child.
- Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Usually a child’s reactions to a traumatic event do not last too long. If a child’s fears or troublesome behaviors persist or seem especially intense, talk to a teacher, counselor, minister or mental health professional in the community who is experienced in working with children. You can call BANANAS Warmline for referrals, 658-6046.

What Can Child Care Providers Do?

Child care providers and staff play a pivotal role in the lives of their families. In fact, child care or school may be the only stable place in children’s lives immediately after a disaster. By providing a consistent environment in the midst of chaos and turmoil, child care programs play a key role in helping children return to normal. Here are some additional thoughts and suggestions for child care providers:

- Keep to normal routines as much as possible. This may not be as easy as it sounds because it is also important to be flexible when dealing with different children’s responses to the trauma.
- Listen to the children. They need to know that it is okay to feel sad, scared or angry and that someone will listen to their feelings. One provider told BANANAS staff after the 1991 East Bay hills fire that her caring, comforting approach with the children did not seem to be helping the children talk. A therapist suggested the provider take a more directive approach and initiate a circle time discussion about the disaster. Once the provider opened up the topic, the children began to respond. One child, who before this time had only talked about his “new house,” was able to share with the group that his old house had burned down. Another child talked about her goldfish and how sad she was that she had been unable to save them. She also tearfully announced that Santa would not be able to find her. On hearing this, the provider suggested that they all write a letter to Santa to let him know where each child could be found. In this way, the provider was able to use the information the children gave her to develop a strategy to help them master their worries and fears.
- Provide opportunities for children to express what is happening and how they are feeling. Dramatic play and drawing are two excellent avenues for expression. Through

play the child is able to talk about traumatic events, act out feelings and come to resolution in a manner that is appropriate for the child's age and ability.

- Be prepared for some post-traumatic symptoms and behavior. And, remember that children may act differently in child care than they do at home. Some of the expected areas of difficulty are:

Separation: Children may experience new difficulty in separating from their parents. Some may revert to clinging behavior or need extra time to say good-bye. Child care providers can assist with this process by developing a plan with parents that is supportive and developmentally appropriate to get through temporary difficulties.

Sleeping: Naptime may also become more problematic. Because of scary dreams or nightmares, children may resist going to sleep. Again reassurance is the best medicine. An adult presence, soothing music and back-rubs may help children relax and feel more at ease about falling asleep. Allowing a child to temporarily sleep in a parent's room may help some children.

Toilet Training: Expect some developmental regressions. Some children who have been dry during the night and at naptime may wet the bed again. Take this in stride and reassure the child that this is okay and s/he will gain control again.

Situational Anxiety: Reminders of the traumatic event may cause some children to exhibit temporary anxiety. Hearing the wail of a siren, for example, may evoke fears or sadness. When this happens, reassurance is again the first order of business. This can also be an opportunity to encourage a child to talk about his/her feelings.

Aggression: Some children may become more aggressive and demanding as the weeks after a disastrous event unfold. Try to provide ways for them to vent their angry feelings without hurting themselves or others. Gentle limit-setting is useful because it lets children know that an adult is still in charge.

- Support the child's parents. Try to give parents the opportunity to talk about their concerns. Make copies of this Handout available to parents or post it on your parent bulletin board. Offer support when and where you can. For children (and probably for all of us) the presence of a supportive, extended family network is the single most important factor affecting recovery after trauma.
- Get support if you need it. Much has been said about supporting and reassuring both children and parents. As a child care provider, you do this on a regular basis. However, when a disaster befalls your community, you may find yourself called upon to support a number of children and families at the same time. Your resources

may be even more drained if you (or your neighborhood) were also directly affected by the disaster. Do not hesitate to ask for help and support for yourself and for your children and families. In any catastrophe, many therapists and counselors come forward to offer free counseling. Call the BANANAS' Warmline staff, 658-6046, for referrals.



- Talk to and learn from other child care programs. Hold a meeting at your house or center or request that the disaster be a topic on the agenda of your child care association or support organization's next meeting. And, remember BANANAS is always happy to host provider get-togethers and meetings. Call on us if you need to.

Activities For Home And Child Care Programs

Providing children with activities which help them deal with their fears allows them to feel more in control. Here are some specific suggestions:

- Provide toys that encourage dramatic play so that children can act out how they experienced the disaster. This will help them express feelings about what has occurred and make these feelings part of their lives. Appropriate toys might include: blocks, fire trucks, cars, ambulances, action figures (fire fighters, police officers, men, women, children), puppets, dolls, and dress-up clothes.
- Remember the power of art. Ask the children to draw pictures of what they saw, heard and felt about the disaster. Encourage children to tell you stories about their creations. Painting and drawing are important ways to identify and work out feelings. After the 1991 East Bay hills fire for example, children at a family day care center drew houses and then used the colors to "burn" them up. Next, they asked the provider to draw a picture of her house. The children drew fires near the child care program but did not burn it up. This house was saved. The children felt relieved.

Other art activities might include:

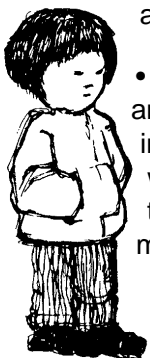
- Providing specially designed materials (e.g. cut-out shapes of objects involved in the disaster – houses, air planes – and let the children draw or paint on them or use them in a collage).
- Planning group art projects such as murals or large-size collages.
- Drawing pictures of the recovery (budding young trees, rebuilt houses and structures). After children have been allowed to express fears and anxieties, it is important for them to move on and allow hope to enter.
- Write stories about the disaster or allow children to dictate short stories to you. Allow children to make up stories about what a super hero could do to "save the day" during

a catastrophe. Set aside time for the children to share their stories with each other.

- Develop dramatic games. One example might be to ask the children to imagine what animal they would be if they were an animal. Then ask them what their animal would do if they witnessed a disaster. Let the children tell you and then show you how their animal characters would react. This type of play-acting can be a non-threatening way for children to express their fears while still feeling in control.
- Remember to emphasize physical activity. This is especially important during times of stress because it helps the child re-establish a sense of self and a sense of security. Group games that involve physical touching within a structure should be encouraged. Examples are: “*Duck, Duck, Goose*,” “*Ring Around the Rosie*,” and “*London Bridge*.” Other large motor activities might include: hopping, jumping, somersaults, pillow fights and roughhousing, as well as organized exercises or simple yoga postures. Don’t forget sand and water play. Both of these activities are soothing and allow the child to work out feelings through play. This might be an especially good time to introduce an activity that includes organized chaos like the game “*Paper Ball Fight*.”

Paper Ball Fight: The players sit in a circle and each child is given one piece of used computer paper to crumple into a ball. (Preschoolers may need adult help to compact their ball into a tight enough wad.) The adult should now announce or review the rules. There are only four rules for this game: 1. Everyone must remain in a kneeling position while playing. 2. Each person can only hold one paper ball at a time. 3. No complaining allowed. 4. Anyone who breaks rules 1, 2 or 3 must leave the game for a short time – a minute or two. Once the rules are established, give the children a signal to begin tossing and catching the paper balls. The game lasts as long as everyone (or almost everyone) is having fun or until the adult in charge is exhausted and wants to stop!

- Make certain that extra food and drinks are readily available. If possible, these should be provided upon the children’s request. This a positive way to provide both physical and emotional nurturing that most children need at stressful times.



- Provide plenty of holding and physical contact and encourage extra cuddling and hugging. Giving each other back rubs can be soothing. One way to let children comfort themselves would be to use hand lotion liberally so that they can massage their own hands.

- Read stories. Use the library as a resource. Following are examples of preschool books

that deal with fire, homes, and loss and provide an opportunity for children to discuss scary situations:

A Chair for My Mother by Vera B. Williams
My Home, A Little Golden Book
The Fall of Freddie the Leaf by Leo Buscaglia, Ph.D.
The Tenth Good Thing About Barney by Judith Viorst
The Quilt Story by Tony Johnston
Fire! Fire! by Gail Gibbons
Goodbye House by Frank Asch
Smoky Night by Eve Bunting

The following picture books encourage children to empathize with others, a good resource in the wake of the attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon:

From a Distance by Julie Gold
All In A Day by Mitsumasa Anno



- Encourage children to come up with a plan (perhaps with the parents’ suggestions) to help and/or thank others. Some ideas: Make cookies and take them to the local fire house. Conduct a penny drive for the Red Cross. Collect and send food and clothes to an area struck by a disaster. Write or send artwork to children in communities affected by a disaster. Even the smallest child can extend a helping hand and be empowered by helping others.

Conclusion

Disasters bring turmoil and fear. But, they also can bring a reaffirmation of our ability to survive and remind us of our interdependence and need for others. Children can learn positive lessons from a calamity with the gentle guidance and support from the adults who love and care for them. While this Handout was written in the aftermath of the 1991 East Bay hills fire, the ideas, suggestions and information it contains can easily be adapted for use in other emergency situations. Unfortunately, disasters are a part of life – fortunately, so is recovery.

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