

## Helping Children Cope with Hurricane Katrina

Please consider each of these general thoughts with an understanding that the levels of devastation for children will vary greatly, from one to the next, depending on what occurred for each of them during the hurricane. Also, some children may have had their greatest exposure through television and living fairly close to, but not in, the actual path of the storm. Some who live far away will have had family members in the midst of the storm. These are general guidelines and thoughts -- amend as you see fit.

**Address their sense of loss of control.** For children who are survivors of the hurricane, giving them any means of choice can help give them a tiny modicum of a sense of control. For children who hear about this, or see coverage, helping them find ways to make a difference may give them a little sense of control as well. Helpful activities might include organizing fundraisers, adopting a school, and sending supplies that are requested to a place that can actually receive them. Adopting a classroom in a shelter might be possible.

**Speak in hopeful terms.** It almost seems obscene to even say so, given the abject suffering endured, but what we do know is that people throughout history have suffered and survived catastrophic events. Sometimes when we don't have hope for ourselves, it helps for someone else to carry hope for us. Sometimes, for a while, we can only endure because someone else believes we'll make it until we can reconnect with that hope ourselves. Acknowledge that it makes sense that they may not yet have hope themselves.

**Make it easy for kids to reveal their concerns and fears to you.** Children take their cues from adults. Sometimes we think that we should act like everything is OK. But when we do that, kids often think they should just act that way as well. Make statements that provide an easy opening for them to talk about fears. There are several ways to do this:

- **State your own fears.** When you do this, take into account the age of the children and their capacity to understand without adding to their fears. For example, "When things like this happen sometimes I worry about where you'll be going to school later this year. But then I realize that, soon, we'll figure that out. What kinds of things worry you?"
- **Ask questions that are general instead of directed specifically at the child.** Instead of "What do you worry about?" you might ask, "What do you think kids are worried about?" Allowing children to think in terms of giving information about other kids allows them to tell you personal fears without having to "own" them right away.
- **Make statements of assumption.** Often when we ask, "Are you worried?" a child will say "No." But if we ask the same child, "All of us are worrying about things right now. Several things. Sometimes it is helpful to just focus on one thing instead of a whole bunch. If you were to think what bothers you most, what might that be?"

**Help kids break things down into manageable steps.** For anyone whose life was uprooted by this hurricane, they are likely overwhelmed when they begin thinking about the long term. But thinking about what to do one step at a time can give one a place to start. Help children think in terms of small steps as well.



**Keep a good amount of conversation cognitive rather than emotional.** Asking people who are entirely overwhelmed how they feel just reinforces their sense of helplessness. But beginning to make a list or a plan can give a them a sense of empowerment. People who have experienced this kind of event are most likely to have flashbacks when experiencing emotional or sensorial reminders. They are less apt to have flashbacks when they use their left brains. Literally, some students learn that they have great relief from flashbacks when they're in math class, because it gives them psychological space from the emotion by engaging the left brain in concrete, sequential activity. So instead of asking a child, "How did you feel when the hurricane took the roof off your house," you might try, "Your family took some very smart actions in order to survive. What did people do that helped you survive?" Instead of, "How does it feel that your grandma died in the hurricane?" perhaps ask, "What can we do together to help you find ways to keep your treasured memories alive?" Since children can't have items that belonged to Grandma (whose house was destroyed in the hurricane), they might look at other ways of keeping fond memories alive... drawing Grandma's favorite kind of flower... learning to a song that she liked... wearing her favorite color. When people can't have keepsakes, create connections to the memory.

**Use ritual and pattern in life to provide some stability.** These people had every shred of stability stripped from their lives. For all of them, especially children, it will be helpful if they can know what to expect, have some kind of routine established, and know ahead of time when that will be changed or disrupted. Since living in mass (at shelters) doesn't provide much freedom to create the kinds of structure and ritual they had in their lives at home, other kinds of ritual may be helpful. If prayer was part of their lives before, setting time daily to connect with spirit may help. Taking an evening walk together as a family or doing another activity together reinforces, "This is how we respond as a family when bad things happen." Kids could have people they check on and check in with (two different functions socially) at fairly specific times each day. For instance, they might always check in before lunch with an elderly person they've come to know in their shelter.

**Share stories of hope and resiliency.** Do this with caution, but one thing that may help amidst the empathy for the struggle is to also talk about others who have survived things that might have been terrible in a similar magnitude but from a different cause. The aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in New York included Anthrax and was fraught with continual fears that another terrorist attack would occur. Many people were afraid for their lives for a very long time. Many people in New York are now doing very well. Some are still struggling. But most of them have more hope for the future now than they did in the first weeks and months after the attack. In some ways our hope rests with our collective human history. People have lived through terrible things and not known in the midst of it how they would survive, but they did. The world as we knew it before the hurricane was as it was in spite of plagues, World Wars and tsunamis.

**Consider special groups.** Some other children will also have special needs, such as those who have a family member who died or is serving in the military in Iraq. Children who have been through other traumatic events will also have increased likelihood of re-experiencing their own fears and disconcerting symptoms related to their survival.

