Whenever a disaster strikes, natural or humanmade, pediatric nurse practitioners are on the forefront, helping children and their parents cope. PNP’s extensive knowledge of child development and children’s responses to stress enable them to provide advice for parents regarding how to help their children at such difficult times. This handout provides guidelines that can be used by PNP’s to help children and parents when they face such disaster situations. The Journal of Pediatric Health Care hopes that this information will be beneficial to PNP’s as they help children and families cope with major stressors in their world.

—Bobbie Nelms, PhD, RN, CPNP, Editor, Journal of Pediatric Health Care

INTRODUCTION

Every year, millions of people are affected by disasters both natural, such as floods or hurricanes, and manmade, such as armed conflict between and within nations. During these times, children require particular attention because of their special needs.

Each child reacts to a disaster according to her developmental stage. Each stage brings to a child a new understanding of the world, the passing of time, and how events happen. To comfort children, it is best to speak to them using words and ideas they can understand.

This booklet focuses on children’s psychological needs and on helping parents and caregivers talk with children. It provides practical guidelines that are easy for parents to use every day.

—Lewis A Leavitt, MD

WHEN DISASTER STRIKES....

When terrible things happen, parents are concerned about the impact these things will have on their children. They want to know how to keep their children safe and protect them from the psychological effects of going through a disaster.

After such an event, parents may feel insecure and worried themselves. They are often concerned about saying either too much or too little to their children.

Each terrible event is different, and each child and family has their own way of coping and relating. Although your family will have a unique response to a disaster, some guidelines may help you understand your child’s reaction and answer his questions.

At different stages of development, children understand the world and how things happen in different ways. In general, these stages of development correspond to age ranges, but each child develops at his own pace. Use the advice that best fits the pattern of your child’s development. The information in this booklet will guide parents and caregivers in addressing the concerns of their children in a way that is best for each age and stage of development.

INFANTS AND TODDLERS (0-3 YEARS OF AGE)

Infants and toddlers are not able to understand how a disaster has changed their environment. Their world is focused on their daily needs for care and feeding. They are able to recognize changes in adult behavior and will respond to those changes.

What infants and toddlers need from parents after a disaster is their usual loving care. Your infant or toddler benefits from the familiar care she is used to receiving. As a parent you can take comfort in the close relationship you have with your child. Your style of interacting with your infant or toddler—the games you played and the stories you read before the disaster—are all still “right” after a disaster.

Resuming normal activities with your child after a disaster benefits both of you.

PRESCHOOL CHILDREN (3-5 YEARS OF AGE)

Children at this stage of development do not fully understand the concept of time or the permanence of death. They do not understand the reasons for physical, financial, or family changes following a disaster.

Preschool children are usually very focused on having parents and family to take care of them and keep them safe. Keeping their usual daily routines, toys and activities is important to them.

The best way to deal with the concerns of preschool children is for your child to experience his relationship with you as it has always been. Loving care and consistent parenting-child interactions reassure parents of their children's safety and well-being.

This information has been provided as an educational service by Johnson & Johnson Pediatric Institute, LLC. It may be copied for use with clients without permission. For more information or to obtain copies of this booklet, please contact the Pediatric Institute at www.pediatricinstitute.com.

sure children that someone is there to protect them and keep them safe.

Preschool children may have specific fears after a terrible event. Talk to your preschool child while playing a game or drawing a picture. This is a good way to learn what a child is thinking or is concerned about. It gives her an opportunity to ask questions when she is ready to do so.

Television news about disasters can be upsetting to young children. They believe television images are real. They think a disaster is happening again and again if they see it repeated on television. Try to limit their viewing of television disaster news.

It is important to watch your child and talk with her about her activities and feelings. Some children may ask questions and others may not.

When preschool children have questions, they may be direct, such as, “Does a dead person wake up?” Sometimes these questions are difficult for parents to answer. Death, for example, is a difficult concept for adults as well as children to understand.

It is best to answer truthfully using simple words and to reassure children who may be worried. For example, if your child asks, “Do people wake up after they die?” You could answer, “People do not wake up after they die, but we remember how they were when they were alive and awake. It’s nice to think about people we like even when they are not with us anymore.”

At this age, children ask questions because they feel insecure just as often as they ask because they want information. Preschool children may not speak about feelings even if asked. It is useful to give reassurance even if they do not speak about their feelings. For example, after answering a question, you could add, “Mommy loves you and is here to take care of you.”

**SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN (5-12 YEARS OF AGE)**

School-aged children have begun to understand how the world works. They have learned about time. They understand some things about past and future and may know how to talk about their feelings. They have opinions about what is right and what is wrong. Although they still do not understand how many things work, they have become familiar with rules of behavior (even if they do not obey them). They have the vocabulary and interest to discuss how and why things happen.

Parents can help school-aged children cope with the results of a disaster by listening and talking with them about their feelings and answering questions they have. It is most important to show and tell children that you are there to love and protect them.

Television images of a disaster may frighten school-aged children. They can understand what happened and may become concerned about their safety. Try to limit their television viewing. Also try to watch television with them and talk about what happened. Talking about it helps you understand their worries and also gives you a chance to comfort them.

Children may be confused by what they hear about a disaster, even though they may understand some of what they have been told. Children may ask questions directly, such as “Why did this happen?” or “Am I safe?” They may also be asking these same questions indirectly when they say, “Will there be school tomorrow?”

It is best to answer children’s questions honestly, directly, and simply. For instance, if your child asks, “Mom, are you sad?” you might say, “Yes, I am sad about what happened.”

Adding reassurance or a statement about how you are coping may give comfort to your child. You could say, “I am sad about what happened, but I am happy that we are together.” Or you could say, “I am sad about what happened, but Dad and I are working hard to make things better for the family.”

Children are helped by having their usual routines and activities, such as playing with friends, begin again. Encouraging children to engage in school or family activities that will help victims of a disaster can make the children feel stronger and less insecure.

**ADOLESCENTS/TEENAGERS (12-17 YEARS OF AGE)**

Teenagers are in the process of finding out who they are. They are developing their own personal styles of coping with the world. Although they are still in need of guidance, they are starting to have their own independent ways to solve problems. When disasters happen, the disruption of everyday life puts their developing values and independence to a sudden test.

Teenagers are able to understand the causes and effects of disasters as adults do. However, most have not developed experience or confidence about how they can or should respond. Their response may be very varied. Sometimes it may be anger and a desire to “get back” at the cause of the disaster. Sometimes it may be sadness, worry, and a desire to stay out of a difficult situation. Often teenagers show both sadness and anger.

Teenagers use friends, teachers, and television for information about the world. Sometimes when teenagers are reluctant to voice their own opinions, you can find out what is on their minds by discussing what they are hearing from their friends or what they are seeing on television.

Parents, friends, and teachers can help teenaged children by discussing causes and effects of disasters. This should include talking about their opinions and feelings as well as about things they can do to help themselves and others deal with the disasters. Teenagers may benefit from participating in efforts to help others who have suffered harm in a disaster. This may be done through their school, in a community organization, or with their family.

Teenagers may voice opinions that are different from yours. It is important to show teenagers that you are interested in their thoughts and feelings. When you show interest and listen, they are more likely to respect your opinions.

Your teenager may not show it, but she is interested in how you are responding to a disaster. It is helpful to share your own feelings in a truthful way. At the same time, try to emphasize how you are overcoming difficulties. It is also important for even teenaged children to know that you are still available to help and protect them.
BEHAVIOR THAT MAY LET YOU KNOW THAT YOUR CHILD NEEDS REASSURANCE

When children confront very stressful or frightening situations, there may be changes in their behavior that reflect their anxiety. Some of these changes may not happen right away. They may appear several weeks later.

- Preschool children may have an increase or return of behavior such as thumb sucking or bed-wetting. They may be more unwilling to be separated from their parents. They may complain of aches and pains such as stomachaches.
- School-aged children may have sleep disturbances or nightmares more often. Their play and drawings may show anger or sadness. Some may have poor concentration at school or complain of aches and pains.
- Teenagers may show anger or sadness. They may have sleeping and eating problems. They may take risks or be reckless. They may have new difficulties at school. They may complain of tiredness or show less interest in activities they used to enjoy. They may also have headaches or stomachaches.

If these behaviors go on for more than a month or are difficult for you to manage, or if you simply feel the need to talk about how to deal with these problems, call or visit your health care professional.

KEEPING IN TOUCH WITH YOUR CHILD

Remember that even after a terrible event, the rules of care and love for children still hold. It is always appropriate to spend special time with your child sharing activities, talking about the events of the day, and answering questions truthfully, reflecting what you believe.

After a disaster, you may be feeling worried or uneasy yourself. You need to take care of yourself so you can help your children. Friends, relatives, or your health care professional can help give you the support you need.

Communication between parent and child is an ongoing process. You will have many chances to answer your child’s questions. You may find that with time your child’s concerns will change. You may need to continue to pay attention to her to give her the reassurance she needs. During difficult times, it is helpful for children to be told that their parents love them and, along with others in the community, are there to protect them.

Dr. Leavitt is Medical Director of the Waisman Center on Human Development at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine. Dr. Leavitt has been involved in research and teaching on infant and child development for more than 25 years. His research and writing have investigated the development of communication between parents and children and the impact of violence on children. Dr. Leavitt is a member of the Board of Johnson & Johnson Pediatric Institute, L.L.C.

HELPING THE CHILDREN

Helping the Children is a collaborative effort of three organizations supporting the needs of children impacted by disasters.

The American Academy of Pediatrics is an organization of 55,000 members dedicated to the health, safety and well-being of infants, children, adolescents and young adults.

The International Pediatric Association (IPA) is dedicated to improving children’s health throughout the world. The IPA is comprised of the national pediatric societies from some 150 countries around the world.

The Johnson & Johnson Pediatric Institute, L.L.C. is dedicated to improving maternal and children’s health by partnering with health care professionals and organizations to help shape the future of children’s health around the world.