

## Helping Your Child Cope with Media Coverage of Disasters: A Fact Sheet for Parents

---

Disasters can be chaotic, confusing, and frightening events, both for those who experience them directly and for those who learn about them through the media.

Experiencing a disaster directly can cause posttraumatic stress reactions, anxiety, fear, worry, grief, and behavioral problems in young people. Media coverage of disasters can also cause distress in children and adolescents.

This means that young people who live through a disaster may be further upset by media coverage of that disaster, and also that youth living far from a disaster can become afraid or worried by media coverage of a disaster that occurs somewhere else.

This fact sheet provides an overview of how media coverage of a disaster may affect your child and suggests strategies that parents can use to address these effects.



### Media Coverage of Disasters

---

While each disaster is different, the news media use common practices when covering disasters. These practices include:

- A tendency to focus on the most sensational aspects of the disaster (such as death, injury, destruction)
- Repetitive use of emotion-stirring images and video (such as buildings burning or cars overturned)

Youth exposure to media coverage of disasters is most likely to occur via TV or the Internet. Therefore, for most of this factsheet we discuss the disaster media coverage that youth “view” or “see” on TV or online. However, children may also hear about disasters on the radio or read about disasters in newspapers or magazines. Therefore parents need to consider their children’s exposure to disaster coverage in all forms of media.

## The Effects of Media Coverage of Disasters on Children and Adolescents

---

Because the news media often focus on the most frightening aspects of disasters, viewing disaster media coverage can be emotionally upsetting for children and adolescents.

Youth who view media coverage may be afraid, worried, or anxious. They may not be able to sleep because of these reactions or may not be able to stop thinking about what they have seen or heard.

Reactions such as fear and worry often result from youth thinking that what they see on TV or the Internet could happen to them or their family.

Disasters covered in the media do not have to occur close to home to be upsetting for children and adolescents. Media coverage of a major disaster like the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks or Hurricane Katrina can upset youth residing far from those events. Older youth may be able to distinguish between disasters that are closer to, or farther from home, but younger children may not be able to make that distinction. Parents should be aware that any disaster depicted in the media has the potential to affect their child.



The more disaster media coverage a young person sees, the more afraid or upset he or she may become. Media coverage of a disaster may cause children and adolescents to worry about what is happening, which in turn causes them to want to watch more of the disaster coverage to get more information, which can then cause them to worry even more.

Younger children may be even more frightened by disaster media coverage than older youth. Video and images of injury, death, and destruction may be particularly upsetting for younger children.

Given the potential of media coverage of disasters to frighten or upset young people, what can you as a parent do? The next section describes strategies you can use to prevent or reduce the distress your child experiences in reaction to disaster media coverage.

## Strategies for Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Disaster Media Coverage

---

### Restriction

A common strategy for parents concerned about potentially upsetting media content is to restrict their children's viewing (this is known as **restriction**). For disaster media coverage, this may be a good strategy for children younger than 8 years old, as children this young may have difficulty comprehending news coverage that is intended for adults. Viewing media coverage without fully understanding it can be particularly frightening or distressing for a child. Thus, to the extent possible, it may be best to help younger children avoid media coverage of disasters.

For older youth, restriction may not be the best or most realistic strategy. Restricting the viewing of disaster coverage in older youth may increase their interest in the story. If increased interest leads youth to watch disaster media coverage without a parent knowing about it (at school, a friend's house, or elsewhere), then the parent will not be able to help that child understand the content or deal with any reactions, potentially resulting in more problems for that child.

### Active Mediation

The best way to help older children and adolescents cope with disaster media coverage may be through **active mediation**. Active mediation entails **monitoring** a child's exposure to media coverage and **explaining** the content of that coverage.

**Monitoring** disaster media coverage includes:

- **Being aware of what a child is seeing.** Ideally, you should watch media coverage of a disaster with your child so that you can help him or her understand the content and address any reactions your child experiences. If you are not able to view the media coverage with your child, you should at least know what media coverage your child is seeing. One way to help accomplish this is by having the television or computer in a family space (as opposed to your child's room) so the child is not alone in his or her room watching potentially upsetting coverage without your awareness.
- **Placing some limits on how much media coverage is viewed.** While restricting a young person from all disaster media coverage may not be the most effective strategy for older youth, it still may be helpful to limit the amount of disaster media coverage your child sees. For example, if you and your child have



watched multiple news stories about a disaster together, then you could suggest that you both turn on something else, such as a sports game or comedy show. Or you might suggest that instead of watching more television, your child could work on homework or go outside and play. It is often difficult to disengage from dramatic news coverage of events, so it is important that you help your child

do so. Additionally, it is also good for adults to limit consumption of media coverage of traumatic events; prompting your child to turn the channel or turn off the TV or computer may benefit you as well.

**Explaining** media coverage of disaster includes:

- **Helping your child understand what has happened and what is happening.** This may include discussing where the disaster happened (e.g., how close the disaster was to your home) and why it occurred. This may also include clarifying any misconceptions your child has about the disaster.
- **Putting the disaster in context.** This may include letting your child know how likely it is that a disaster like the one covered in the media could happen to your family. For example, if you live in Minnesota, being affected by a hurricane is unlikely and this information may reassure your child.

- **Informing your child about the nature of the media and news coverage.** Discuss with your child how the news typically shows the scariest parts of any situation and repeats those parts over and over. This may help children understand that repeated images or video of death and destruction are not the only thing happening.
- **Reminding your child that there are plenty of good things going on in the world.** Talk with your child about the good things that are occurring in your community. Discuss with your child how positive events do not make the news, but happen all the time. It may also help to discuss with your child that there are lots of good people helping during a disaster (such as emergency responders, medical personnel, the government, and volunteers).
- **Assuring your child that he or she is safe.** Explain to your child that he or she is safe and that you will always do everything you can to keep him or her safe.
- **Comforting your child if he or she is upset.** If your child is upset about disaster media coverage, then provide whatever parental comfort you can. This will include verbal assurances of safety, but could also include physical affection like a hug. Encourage your child to tell you if he or she gets upset again.



The **most important** thing you can do as a parent is to **talk with your child** about the disaster media coverage he or she has seen.

You may not always be sure of what the best thing to say is, but listening to your child's concerns, providing explanations of media content, and giving assurances of care and safety will help. For older or more mature youth, a more critical discussion of the disaster and feelings related to the disaster may be helpful. But for all children, start by listening, explaining events, clarifying what happened, and providing assurances of safety and expressions of comfort.

## Helping Your Child Deal with His or Her Emotions

---

Young people may feel confused and overwhelmed by their emotional reactions to disaster media coverage. They may need your help to sort through their feelings.

Helping a child deal with an emotional event includes:

- Being aware of your own emotions, and taking steps to cope with them in a healthy way that allows you to “be there” for your child.
- Being available to discuss the event with your child.
- Listening to what your child says and validating his or her emotions.
- Providing honest responses to your child’s questions, without overwhelming him or her with information.
- Encouraging your child to talk about the event. If your child is having difficulty talking about what is happening, use open-ended questions to start a conversation. (Examples of questions you might ask include: How do you feel about what happened? What do you think happened? Why do you think this happened?)
- Reassuring your child that he or she is safe and that you will do everything you can to keep him or her safe.

**Be aware of your own emotions.** Being able to talk about the disaster will help your child. To do so, you may need to take steps to control your own emotions so that you can listen to, talk with, and reassure your child. It is natural to be upset and worried following a disaster, but sharing all of your own fears with your child can overwhelm him or her. Parents are models of emotional reactions and coping skills for their children. If your child sees you dealing in a healthy and honest way with your emotions and realizes that it is possible to cope with even difficult or negative emotions and circumstances, he or she may feel reassured and may learn good emotional reactions in the process.

## Helping Your Child Develop Good Coping Skills

---

You can also help your child by modeling good coping skills, by praising your child's positive coping actions, and by not endorsing or reinforcing your child's anxious responses.

For example, if the media is covering a significant disaster a child may decide that he or she should avoid an activity at school in order to remain safe. If the disaster happened far away, then there is likely no need to avoid/miss the activity. In such a situation, you should not reinforce a child's anxious reaction by supporting his or her avoidance behavior; instead help your child understand that the desire to avoid the activity is triggered by anxiety and encourage him or her to attend the event.



Parents can also suggest good coping skills. One way to cope following a disaster is to find a way to help those affected by the disaster. Help your child identify ways to help such as making a donation of money or goods to a disaster relief agency. Donating time to a local community organization could have a positive impact on the community even if it is not directly related to a specific disaster.

Another way a family can cope with the fear and uncertainty caused by media coverage of a disaster is to create a family disaster plan and compile a disaster kit. This encourages the family to come together and take actions that can increase family safety. Information on how to create a family preparedness plan is available in the “Additional Information” section at the end of this document.

## Summary

---

- ✓ Media coverage of disasters can worry or frighten children and adolescents.
- ✓ A disaster does not have to be in your community for media coverage to affect your child.
- ✓ The news media tend to emphasize the most frightening aspects of a disaster.
- ✓ You can help young children by restricting their exposure to media coverage.
- ✓ With all children and adolescents, active mediation (monitoring and explaining) can help them cope with media coverage of disasters.
- ✓ The most important thing you can do is to talk about disaster media coverage with your child.
- ✓ Dealing with your own emotions about a disaster will help you “be there” for your child.
- ✓ You can model and encourage good coping skills for your children.
- ✓ Find a positive way for you and your child to cope with the disaster by helping others.

## Additional Information

---

Information on how to talk to children about disasters is available from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network:

<http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/natural-disasters>

Information for youth about the causes of disasters and how to be disaster prepared is available from FEMA for Kids:

<http://www.fema.gov/kids>

Instructions for developing a family emergency plan are available from Ready America:

<http://www.ready.gov/make-a-plan>

Copyright © 2011 Houston JB, Rosenholtz CE, Weisbrod JL (Terrorism and Disaster Center at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center). All rights reserved. You are welcome to copy or redistribute this material in print or electronically provided the text is not modified, the authors and the Terrorism and Disaster Center at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center are cited in any use, and no fee is charged for copies of this publication. Unauthorized commercial publication or exploitation of this material is specifically prohibited. If you would like permission to adapt or license these materials, please contact TDC at [tdc@ouhsc.edu](mailto:tdc@ouhsc.edu) or 405.271.5121.

This work was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

The views, opinions, and content are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or HHS.