

## **Miami-Dade County Public Schools Division of Student Services**

### **Helping Children Cope With a Hurricane Experience: Information for Parents**

Experiencing a hurricane can be traumatic under any circumstance. The scale and scope of a hurricane will significantly increase the impact on the children and adults exposed to the disaster. Clearly, those most at risk are residents of the most severely damaged regions (especially those residents living in poverty); however, the after-effects will also impact inland areas, neighboring states offering shelter to dislocated survivors, and families of survivors across the country.

Children are particularly vulnerable. They may have difficulty processing the extent of the physical threat, loss of life, destruction to homes and communities, breakdown of civil systems and continued uncertainty. They will look to the significant adults in their lives for reassurance that they and their loved ones will be okay, and that life will eventually return to normal or some sense of stability. **In addition to securing physical safety, supporting children's mental health in the immediate and long-term aftermath of the disaster is paramount.**

Parents, teachers, and other caregivers can help children and youth cope by remaining calm and reassuring children that they will be all right. Especially, among younger children, the reactions of significant adults in their lives will be critical in determining how distressed they are by the hurricane and its aftermath. The return to normalcy (although some things may never be the same) will take time. Immediate response efforts should emphasize teaching effective coping strategies (such as those that directly address hurricane related problems), reestablishing and promoting supportive relationships (with friends and family), finding and following comforting routines, and helping children understand their reactions (especially important is communicating that most hurricane reactions are normal).

#### **Possible Reactions of Children and Youth to a Hurricane**

##### **Initial Common Crisis Reactions**

Initial crisis reactions that many children might be expected to display at different age levels include the following:

- **Preschoolers** – thumb sucking, bedwetting, clinging to parents, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, fear of the dark, regression in behavior and withdrawal from friends and routines
- **Elementary School Children** – irritability, aggressiveness, clinginess, nightmares, school avoidance, poor concentration and withdrawal from activities and friends
- **Adolescents** – sleeping and eating disturbances, aggression, agitation, increase in conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behavior and poor concentration

Additional reactions immediately following a hurricane may include emotional and physical exhaustion, fear, anxiety, confusion, disbelief and grief. Symptoms can include difficulty sleeping, crying, regression, upset stomach, dizziness, inability to concentrate,

misbehavior or aggression. In some instances children may experience survivor guilt (e.g., that their home was left unharmed, while others were completely destroyed). The sights, sounds and smells of a hurricane often generate fear and anxiety. Consequently, similar sensations (e.g., strong rain, thunder, or winds) may generate distress among children in the months that follow. Given the scale of a hurricane, individuals living outside the primary impact area may still feel exposed to the danger from local wind damage, flooding, the impact on family or friends and television reports. Some children may also react to follow-up news coverage and weather reports that talk about hurricane related conditions after the fact.

As other hurricanes approach the country, children and others may show higher levels of anxiety. The sometimes-prolonged nature of recovery from floods may increase feelings of fear, confusion and anger. For some children, emotional responses may not emerge for weeks or months to come, as they are then able to return to lost homes, schools, and neighborhoods and personally experience what has been lost.

With the passage of time and support from adults (in particular parents and other familiar caregivers), most children will be able to cope with their hurricane experiences. **A minority of children, though, may be at risk for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).** Symptoms can include those listed above that last for several weeks. Other symptoms may include re-experiencing the hurricane during play and/or dreams; anticipating or feeling that a hurricane is happening again; avoiding reminders of the hurricane; general numbness to emotional topics; and increased arousal symptoms such as inability to concentrate and startle reactions. **Although extremely rare, some adolescents may also be at increased risk of suicide if they suffer from serious mental health problems like PTSD or depression and should be referred immediately for appropriate mental health support.**

### **Guidance for Parents and Caregivers**

**Remain calm and reassuring.** Children take their cues from adults, especially young children. Acknowledge the loss or destruction, but emphasize the community and nation's efforts to cleanup and rebuild. To the extent it is possible and honest to do so, assure them that family and friends will take care of them and keep them safe.

**Acknowledge and normalize their feelings.** Allow children to discuss their feelings and concerns, and address any questions they may have regarding the event. Listen and empathize. An empathetic listener is very important. Let them know that their reactions are normal and expected.

**Promote positive coping and problem-solving skills.** Activities should teach children how to apply problem-solving skills to hurricane related stressors. Encourage children to develop realistic and positive methods of coping that increase their ability to manage their anxiety and to identify which strategies fit with each situation.

**Emphasize children's resiliency.** Focus on their competencies. Help children identify and reinforce what they have done in the past that helped them cope when they were frightened or upset. Bring their attention to other communities that have experienced hurricanes and recovered.

**Strengthen children's friendship and peer support.** Children with strong emotional support from others are better able to cope with adversity. Children's relationships with peers can provide suggestions for how to cope and can help decrease isolation. For many children in this situation, friendships may be disrupted because of family relocations. In some cases, parents may be less available to provide support to their children because of their own distress and feelings of being overwhelmed. Activities such as asking children to work cooperatively in small groups can help children strengthen supportive relationships with their peers.

**Connect with support systems in the community.** Most communities will have emergency services in place for some time. Family, friends, and neighbors can be sources of support if they are in proximity and coping themselves. Faith communities and youth service organizations can provide a sense of connection for children and families. Similarly, local schools that can reopen are often a critical resource as well, offering a safe, familiar, and centralized location for gatherings, information and referrals to necessary services. The school will also be important in communities taking in displaced families left homeless by a hurricane.

**Monitor television and internet viewing:** While it will be important for older children and adolescents to have some access to news reports and hurricane updates, it is recommended that they not be allowed to engage in extensive (unlimited and uninterrupted) media coverage of disaster related events. Young children should not watch hurricane images or listen to the news.

**Encourage children to talk about hurricane-related events.** Children need an opportunity to discuss their experiences in a safe, accepting environment. Provide activities that enable children to discuss their experiences. This may include a range of methods (both verbal and nonverbal) and incorporate varying projects (e.g., drawing, stories, audio and video recording). It is always appropriate to seek the help of a mental health professional if you need help with ideas or managing the conversation.

**Engage children in activities they enjoy.** Participating in fun activities, such as reading, games, sports and arts and crafts can help distract children from the situation and foster a sense of security. This is particularly important for displaced children and those living in shelters for whom a return to their "normal" is unlikely in the near future.

**Be prepared to discuss difficult questions.** Children are likely to ask challenging questions such as how God could let such a horrible disaster happen, why grownups can't provide more help sooner, if life will ever be the same, or why such lawlessness occurred in the aftermath. Think about your feelings or beliefs on these issues. Be honest but try to include a positive aspect to your answers. Acknowledging that you don't know the answer to all their questions is okay. Explain that looting and violence is inexcusable but that people who are frightened and without help sometimes get desperate and do things they would not normally do. Emphasize that you and other adults are doing everything possible to keep them safe.

**Contact your school.** Let school officials know where your family is, how to get in touch with you if possible, and your situation (lost home, a death in the family, relocating, etc.). In time, even in the most impacted areas, school personnel will be working to connect with families and provide information. Check the school website for resources and updates on decisions about plans for re-opening or relocating students. Important

to a child's recovery from hurricane related distress will be the extent to which he or she is able to return to as normal a school routine as possible. Finding a way to get a dislocated child back into some sort of school environment will help to demonstrate that not everything has changed and that a return to normalcy or stability is possible.

**Take care of your own needs.** Take time for yourself and try to deal with your own reactions to the situation as fully as possible. You will be better able to help your children if you are coping well. If you are anxious or upset, your children are more likely to feel the same way. Talk to other adults such as family, friends, faith leaders or counselors. It is important not to dwell on your fears or anxiety by yourself. Sharing feelings with others often makes people feel more connected and secure. Take care of your physical health. Make time, however small, to do things you enjoy. **Avoid using drugs or alcohol to feel better.**

Adapted From:

Responding to Hurricane Katrina: Helping Children Cope (2005), Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Responding to Hurricane Katrina: Understanding Reactions of Children and Youth (2005), Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.