



Talking with Kids during Times of Disaster

Helping your child grow into a healthy and responsible adult is a rewarding part of being a parent, but it's not always an easy job. Helping kids cope and manage feelings around such disasters as Hurricane Katrina is a difficult, fragile task, but an important one to see through. Kids are seeing the same images on TV as adults, and will experience sadness, helplessness, and possibly even fear. Acknowledge that these feelings are normal and valid. They won't necessarily know what to do with their emotions, so it's up to parents to move them through these feelings.

Here are some things you can do to help children process a major catastrophe:

Emotionally connect with your child. Give your child extra attention and consideration. Keeping the lines of communication open and encouraging discussion is key. Be there to listen, but don't force your teen to talk about feelings and emotions. If your child asks how you feel, be honest but temper your emotions with calmness and control, as kids will internalize your reaction.

Be alert to signs of stress. Following exposure to a disaster or traumatic event, children are likely to show signs of stress. These signs may present as anxiety, aggressive behavior, stomachaches/headaches or a desire to stay home from school and other activities. These are normal reactions and often don't last long. Maintain their routine, encourage regular social and recreational activities, and urge participation in physical activities.

Volunteer to help as a family. No one is helpless. The American Red Cross has established numerous ways in which people can offer their assistance. Organize a small fundraiser where the proceeds or collected items go to the Red Cross or other non-profit organizations. Sponsor a family who has been affected by the tragedy. For more information, call the American Red Cross at 800-435-7669.

Establish family time. Whether it's eating together, calling a game night (with no TV) or setting a family meeting, use the time to discuss what's going on in your teen's life and what their friends are saying/feeling. Talk about positive things and limit the amount of TV they are watching.

Remember, feelings don't need to be "fixed," but rather focus on helping your child understand and deal with his/her experiences. If signs of stress don't seem to be subsiding after a few weeks, consider consulting your child's pediatrician or family physician. Or call your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) at 800-869-0276 or visit the Member Access page of the EAP's web site: www.eapconsultants.com.

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