

Children Vulnerable To Disaster-Related Stress

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TRENTON, N.J. -- Hurricane Sandy left behind more than physical destruction. As people in New Jersey begin to rebuild, every affected family has faced a disruption of their normal lives. Many must also confront the anguish of losing a home.

Children are particularly vulnerable to the stress that follows a natural disaster, and their symptoms may linger much longer than in adults, according to mental health experts. They also react to how adults behave in stressful situations, so it's important for parents and caregivers to look after their own mental health in the wake of a disaster.

Parents and other caregivers should be alert to signs of stress-related troubles and learn how to deal with their children's fears and unusual behaviors.

Children ages 5 or younger may cry more frequently than usual, become clingy, have nightmares, show excessive fear of the dark, fear of animals or fear of being alone. Appetites may change. They may speak with difficulty or revert to behaviors such as bed-wetting or thumb-sucking.

Children ages 5 to 11 may exhibit increased irritability, aggression, and competition with their siblings for parental attention. Some become preoccupied with the disaster and want to talk about it continually. They

may also show anxiety through whining, withdrawing from their peers, and losing interest in normal activities.

Teenagers 11 to 18 may show outright rebellion, physical problems, and sleep disturbances. They may engage in risk-taking behaviors such as reckless driving or alcohol and drug abuse.

Those signs of anxiety often result from the losses, disruption to family life, and a sense of a hostile world created by a natural disaster. The following suggestions may help to reduce stress in children:

- Spend time each day giving each child undivided attention, even if just for a few minutes. Share experiences. Reaffirm your love. Make plans together. Just “be there” for each other.
- Encourage them to talk. Ask children to describe what they are feeling. Let them talk about the disaster and ask as many questions as they like. Listen to what they say. Assure them that the disaster was an act of nature and not caused by them. Include the entire family in the discussion, if possible.
- Understand their fears. It is important that parents accept anxieties as being very real to children. Help them understand what causes their anxieties and fears. Recognize their losses, such as their pets, favorite toys and other personal items. Reassure them that everything will be all right.
- Explain what is going on. Make every effort to keep children informed about what is happening. Explanations should be in simple language. With children 5 or older, rehearse safety measures for use in case of future disasters.
- Reassure them. Parents can help reassure children by telling them they are safe, holding and hugging them frequently, restoring normal

routines, providing play experiences for them, and making bedtime a special moment of calm and comfort.

- Encourage activities with their peers. As with adults, social time with friends is a very important part of the recovery process.
- Temporarily lower expectations of them. Allow for the fact that stress from the disaster can show itself in many ways over a period of time, and make appropriate allowances.

The New Jersey Department of Human Services is coordinating statewide efforts to help individuals and communities manage the emotional impact of the storm. Crisis counselors are currently providing support in many shelters and assisting in FEMA Disaster Recovery Centers as needed.

In addition to providing face-to-face disaster crisis counseling, the state provides informational materials about coping and they partner with the Mental Health Association in New Jersey to offer assistance through a toll free helpline: 877-294-4357 (also applies to VRS or 711-Relay users) or TTY 877-294-4356. Or visit their

website: www.state.nj.us/humanservices/dmhs/disaster/.

Parents, guardians and caregivers may also want to contact their local mental health agency for information on resources in their community that can assist children after disasters.

For more information call 877-652-7624, 24 hours a day, seven days a week; or visit the website www.performcarenj.org.