Disasters and trauma
After experiencing a disaster—whether it is a flood, earthquake, fire, hurricane or bombing—children may react in ways that are difficult to understand. Even if you or your child were not physically injured, the emotional response can be strong. They may act clingy, irritable or distant, and although they are very young and do not seem to understand what is going on, they are affected as much as adults. Adult fears and anxieties are communicated to children in many ways. The experience is more difficult for them, as they do not understand the connection between the disaster and all the upheaval that follows. They need reassurance that everything is all right.

There is a wide range of “normal” reactions for children following a disaster, most of which can be handled with extra support at home, child care and school. In some cases, professional intervention may be needed, despite everyone’s best efforts. Early intervention can help a child avoid more severe problems.

Message to parents
Some ways to provide reassurance after a disaster are:

• Try to remain calm.
• Remember the effect and anxiety produced by watching television coverage or listening to the radio. Keep TV/radio/adult conversations about the disaster at a minimum around young children.
• Spend extra time being close to your child(ren).
• Answer all questions as honestly and simply as possible. Be prepared to answer the same questions over and over. Children need reassurance to master their fears.
• Spend extra time with your child at bedtime—soothing and relaxing time—talking, reading or singing quietly.
• Spend extra time with your child when bringing them to child care—they may be afraid you will not come back.
• Try to return to a normal routine as soon as possible to restore a sense of normalcy and security.

• Don’t promise there won’t be another disaster. Instead, encourage children to talk about their fears and what they can do to help in case of disaster. Tell them you will do everything you can to keep them safe.
• Be patient and understanding if your child is having difficulties.
• Never use threats. Saying, “If you don’t behave an earthquake will swallow you up,” will only add to the fear and not help your child behave more acceptably.
• Consider how you and your child can help. Children are better able to regain their sense of security if they can help in some way.
• Share your concerns with your child’s teacher or child care provider. Consider assistance from professionals trained to work with disaster victims.

Message to child care providers
You can be a support and resource to parents by helping them understand behavioral and emotional responses. Be sensitive to how parents feel when they are separated from their children in a disaster. It may be very helpful for parents, children and you to take some extra time when dropping off children in the morning. A group meeting to reassure parents, discuss your response to their children’s reactions, and review your emergency plan will help everyone feel more secure.

Help children cope by reenacting how the disaster felt and talking about their fears so they can master them. Talk about being afraid, and practice what you will do the next time a disaster strikes. Because young children think the world revolves around them, children may need reassurance that they did not cause the disaster.

Consider referring a family for professional help if any of the behaviors on the following page persists two to four weeks after the disaster. Children who have lost family members or friends, or who were physically injured or felt they were in life-threatening danger, are at special risk for emotional disturbance. Children who have been in previous disasters or who are involved in a family crisis may also have more difficulty coping.

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