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MontGuide

Helping Children Cope with Natural Disasters

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In the past few years many Montanans have experienced the trauma of natural disasters including floods, wildfires and drought. While parents are trying to manage family logistics during these times, children are also dealing with the event. This guide will discuss children's responses to traumatic events and how parents can help their children through the process.

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NATURAL DISASTERS CAN BE TRAUMATIC EVENTS

for families due to impacts from evacuations, displacement if the home is lost, loss of family incomes, and injuries or death. Children do not have the skills to process these events like adults. Additionally, children rely on their parents to take care of problems and when they see their parents not coping well, this further adds to their anxiety and stress. One study found that parental stress after a natural disaster predicted the level of stress their children experienced. Children who were highly exposed to the event – losing their home or experiencing the death of a family member – were even more vulnerable due to their parents' stress level. The number of stressful events is also significant as children who experienced more major stressful events were affected more severely. These studies point to the need for parents to be aware of their own stress levels and be in tune to stress in their children.

The goal after a natural disaster is to restore life back to normal. During these crises, family life is out of balance. Parents are upset and stressed. Children are worried, anxious, and scared and may lack necessary coping skills to effectively work through their feelings, especially if parents are not coping well with the crisis. In addition, children often lack a vocabulary to talk about their feelings.

When children experience a natural disaster their stress can be traumatic. The term to describe their situation is called child traumatic stress. This affects the child both physiologically and psychologically. Some physiological reactions include agitation, increased heart rate, and perspiration. Psychological reactions may include crying, anxiety, fear of being away from a parent, and anger. These are normal reactions to a stressful event. If the stress becomes overwhelming,

a child could develop post-traumatic stress disorder. However, this disorder should be diagnosed and is best addressed by a licensed mental health professional.

How Children Respond

Very young children may respond to stress by crying more often, experiencing restless sleep, having temper tantrums, and reverting to earlier behaviors such as thumb sucking. They may want more attention from their parents and be "clingy." They are responding to the imbalance in the family and their fears about what is happening around them. They naturally seek comfort.

Older children may also cry and have interrupted sleep. They may also be angry and argue more with siblings. They may have logical fears such as "How will I get home from school today if the fire spreads?" This is because their thought processes are more developed so they can think ahead. Older children are trying to make sense of the situation. They may feel helpless because life is out of their control. Adolescents may act out more or engage in delinquent behavior. Children and adolescents may also withdraw and disengage from the family.

Adult Influences on Children

Parents and other caregivers' first thoughts during a natural disaster are generally the safety and well-being of their children. At the same time, the adults are processing the situation and thinking about future issues such as the financial impact to the family. Although adults may do their best to keep concerns such as finances or the loss of a home from their children, children do pick up on their parents' stress. Adults have similar physiological responses to stress as those listed for children. Other signs of stress may

include high blood pressure, headaches, and ulcers, flare-ups of problems such as increased pain if one has arthritis or is susceptible to migraines. Parents also experience emotional reactions to stress including irritability, crying, depression, and forgetfulness. Being aware of these signs of stress and addressing them can help adults maintain the health they need in order to continue good parenting during challenging times.

Parents may become irritable when faced with the stress of a natural disaster while trying to keep short tempers in check. Children are scared and confused and may act out. Parents need to realize that children are unable to cope with the stress in the same way that adults do.

Marital problems are a sign of stress. During a natural disaster, spouses or partners may place blame on one another for what they believe could have been done. If spouses start to argue more or are feeling distant, each person needs to take a step back and try to determine what is causing discord. It could be the stress from dealing with the natural disaster. Arguing with a spouse or partner will make your child even more stressed and insecure.

School and Childcare Help

A child's school or child care is a normal part of life and routine. Often normalcy and routine is best for children during a time of chaos and stress. Although parents may want to keep their children close during a natural disaster, it may help them to return to school. At school they can be with their friends and have daily structure. Teachers can help by letting children talk about the natural disaster. They might have activities that can help children express fears and curiosity in constructive ways. For example, the teachers might have younger children draw about their experiences. Older children might compile scrapbooks about the experience or work with teachers on projects where they learn about wind, tornadoes or wildfires.

Attending school or day care can provide relief from the family situation associated with the disaster, at least for part of the day. This may be especially important if the family is displaced and living in a shelter, hotel, or even with other family members.

Ways to Help Children During and Following Natural Disasters

Stress is inevitable during a natural disaster. There are things you can do for yourself and your child during and following a natural disaster. Here are some suggestions:

Be prepared. If there is a threat of evacuation, gather important items such as family photos, valuables, and important documents. Have them boxed and ready to load into a vehicle at a moment's notice. For more help on organizing important documents, see the MSU Extension publications, *Your Important Papers: What to Keep and Where* (MT199611HR), and *A Citizen's Guide to Basic Evacuation Procedures* (4448), both available online or by asking your county Extension office for copies. Plan for the evacuation of pets and livestock. If possible, include some toys and games to use if you need to stay in a shelter. Explain to your child that you are preparing in case it isn't safe to stay in the house.

Heed warnings. Listen to what officials are saying about evacuations. Abide by their notices. Let your child know that you have things under control. Tell your child that you are following officials' recommendations because they want to keep the family safe too.

Make a plan. Let all members of the family know what you will do should you need to evacuate. Have a meeting place designated such as a school or a shelter if not at home.

Maintain routines. Follow routines as much as possible. This can be difficult if you are evacuated and living in a shelter as there is often little privacy and no schedule. Encourage your child to get up in the morning at his or her regular time, eat as close as possible to your regular schedule. Take walks, play games, and read to help keep your child active and his/her mind off of the crisis.

Take care of yourself. Just as flight attendants tell us to "put the oxygen mask on yourself before helping others," we need to do this during natural disasters. We cannot take care of our children well if we do not take care of ourselves. Make sure you are getting enough rest, exercise, nutrition, and have an appropriate outlet for your own stress and fears.

Listen to your child. Allow your child to express his/her feelings about the situation. Affirm the feelings by simply stating back what you hear: “You are feeling scared.” Young children may need to express their feelings through drawings or play. Older children will be able to verbalize their feelings. It is important to let your child know that you are listening, not telling them how to feel, but simply saying that you understand how they feel.

Talk to your child. Let them know your feelings too, although limit what you say. For example, you could say, “I am scared and frustrated too.” Then let them know that you are doing everything you can to keep them safe and help them get back home soon. Perhaps, this is a good time to talk with your child about what you do when you feel scared or worried. Save personal breakdowns for private conversations with another adult.

Limit media exposure. Avoid having a television or radio on that regularly shows the disaster. Try watching the news when the children are in bed or occupied elsewhere. News reports tend to sensationalize the event. Explain what is seen on the news so the children understand the scope of the disaster in comparison to their lives.

Accept help from others. Montanans tend to be independent people who do not like to rely on others. During and after a natural disaster is a time when reaching out for help is necessary. Feeling socially connected helps children during disasters. By accepting help from others in the community, such as receiving food from the food bank, your child learns several lessons. These lessons include; compassion, the importance of community and being connected with others, and that it is okay to admit that we all need help at times.

Conclusion

Natural disasters are beyond the control of families. Understanding how to respond to help yourself and your children is important. Over time, most individuals are able to cope and adapt to life after a natural disaster; however, life will be different due to the experience.

References:

Mohay, H. & Forbes, N. (2009). *Reducing the Risk of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Children Following Natural Disasters*. Australian Journal of Guidance and Counseling. 19(2) 179-195.

National Child Traumatic Stress Network. www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/age_related_reactions_to_a_traumatic_event.pdf

Resources

American School Counselor Association. *Helping Children Cope with Natural Disasters*. www.schoolcounselor.org/content.asp?contentid=699

University of Illinois Extension. *Children, Stress and Natural Disasters*. <http://web.extension.illinois.edu/disaster/teacher/teacher.html>

National Child Traumatic Stress Network. www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/natural-disasters

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