

EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL REACTIONS OF CHILDREN TO DISASTERS

The reactions of children to disasters are affected by five important factors:

1. A child's perception of adults' reactions to the disaster.
2. The amount of direct exposure the child has had to the destruction of the disaster.
3. A child's developmental age.
4. The existence of family or other problems prior to the event.
5. Prior experience in another disaster.

PRESCHOOL: AGES 1 TO 5

- Children this age are particularly vulnerable to changes in routine.
- They lack the ability to verbalize their feelings and the conceptual skills to cope with sudden stress.
- They are affected by the reactions of family members and school personnel.
- Some of the common emotional and behavioral reactions to a natural disaster include:
 - Denial of the event, or no reaction whatsoever.
 - Nervousness.
 - Irritability.
 - Disobedience.
 - Hyperactivity.
 - Tics.
 - Speech difficulties.
 - Anxiety about any separation from parents.
 - Shorter attention span.
 - Aggressive behavior.
 - Sudden bursts of tears.
- These typical responses can manifest themselves in the following physiological reactions:
 - Loss of appetite or overeating.
 - Indigestion or vomiting.
 - Bowel or bladder problems.
 - Sleep disorders and nightmares.

EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL REACTIONS OF CHILDREN TO DISASTERS (CONTINUED)

- Stress in these children may result in the following regressive reactions:
 - Resumption of bedwetting.
 - Thumbsucking.
 - Fear of:
 - Darkness.
 - Animals.
 - Monsters.
 - Strangers.

- Actions you can take in the classroom to alleviate some of this stress include:
 - Re-establishing comfortable routines.
 - Providing opportunities for children to express their feelings both verbally and nonverbally.
 - Giving ample physical comfort (e.g., hugs, holding hands).
 - Physical re-enactment of the disaster.
 - Patient and repetitive clarification of what actually took place.

EARLY CHILDHOOD: AGES 5-11

- Regressive behaviors are especially common.
- Children may become withdrawn and/or more aggressive.
- They may be particularly affected by the loss of prized objects or pets.
- Some of the common emotional and behavioral reactions include:
 - School phobia.
 - Withdrawal from friends.
 - Hyperactivity.
 - Irritability.
 - Disobedience.
 - Inability to concentrate.
 - Repetitive talking about their experience.
 - Aggressive behavior.

- These typical responses can manifest themselves in the following physiological reactions:
 - Headaches.
 - Nausea.
 - Sleep disturbances.
 - Persistent itching and scratching.
 - Complaints of visual or hearing problems.

EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL REACTIONS OF CHILDREN TO DISASTERS (CONTINUED)

- Stress in this age group may result in the following regressive behaviors:
 - Increased competition for attention.
 - Excessive clinging.
 - Wanting to be fed or dressed.
 - Engaging in habits they had previously given up.

- Actions you can take in the classroom to alleviate some of this stress include:
 - Giving additional attention and consideration.
 - Temporarily lessening requirements for optimum performance in academics.
 - Providing opportunity for structured but undemanding chores.
 - Encouraging verbal expression of thought and feelings about the disaster.
 - Encouraging physical activity.
 - Rehearsing safety measures to be taken in future disasters.

PREADOLESCENT: AGES 11 TO 14

- Peer reactions are very important to this group.
- They need to know their feelings are typical.
- Survivor's guilt might emerge in this age group.
- Group discussion can be effective in reducing the sense of isolation.
- Some of the common emotional and behavioral reactions include:
 - Disruptive behavior.
 - Sadness or depression.
 - Resistance to authority.
 - Loss of interest in hobbies and peer activities.
 - Inability to concentrate.

- These typical responses can manifest themselves in the following physiological reactions:
 - Complaints of vague aches and pains.
 - Overeating or loss of appetite.
 - Skin disorders.
 - Sleep disorders.

- Actions you can take in the classroom to help alleviate this stress include:
 - Reassuring them that their responses are typical.
 - Teaching them that with time they will be able to function and concentrate again.
 - Giving them additional consideration and attention.
 - Encouraging verbal expression of feelings.
 - Providing structured but undemanding responsibilities.
 - Rehearsing safety measures to be taken in future disasters.
 - Encouraging physical activity.

EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL REACTIONS OF CHILDREN TO DISASTERS (CONTINUED)

ADOLESCENT: AGES 14 TO 18

- These children may have extreme fear that their reactions might differ from the peer group.
- They may be frustrated by their lack of adult responsibilities.
- Some of the common emotional and behavioral reactions for this age group include:
 - Marked increase or decrease in physical activity level.
 - Expression of feelings of inadequacy and helplessness.
 - Delinquent behavior.
 - Depression.
 - Increased difficulty in concentration.
 - Extreme mood swings.
- Actions you can take in the classroom to alleviate this stress include:
 - Encouraging discussion of the disaster with peers and adults.
 - Temporarily reducing expectations of academic performance.
 - Encouraging involvement in school rehabilitation and recovery efforts.
 - Encouraging resumption of social activities.