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- Children may become withdrawn and/or more aggressive.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.
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.