

Children's Responses to Crises and Tragic Events¹



Infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and young children who experience a tragic event may show changes in their behaviors. They may also be indirectly affected by a crisis by what they see on the TV or hear.

The most important role you can play as a parent in an emergency situation is to stay calm. Children of all ages easily pick up on their parents or other's fears and anxieties. This may cause changes in behaviors.

Children, no matter what their age, do not always have the words to tell you how they are feeling. They may not know how to talk about what has happened. Their behavior can be a better sign. Sudden changes in behavior can mean they have been exposed to trauma or a crisis.

What you might see:

- Problems sleeping, including not wanting to sleep alone, having a hard time at naptime or bedtime, not wanting to sleep or repeatedly waking up, nightmares
- Separation anxiety, including not wanting to be away from you, not wanting to go to school, and crying or complaining when you leave
- Not eating
- Not being able to do things they used to do
- Being scared by new things
- More cranky behaviors
- Being more stubborn than usual

¹Material adapted from:

National Child Traumatic Stress Network Schools Committee. (October 2008). *Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators*. Los Angeles, CA & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress

National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Parent Tips for Helping Infants and Toddlers after Disasters. Available at http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/pfa/english/appendix_e4_tips_for_parents_with_infants_and_toddlers.pdf

HealthyChildren.org. What to tell your children about disasters. <http://www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Getting-Your-Family-Prepared-for-a-Disaster.aspx>

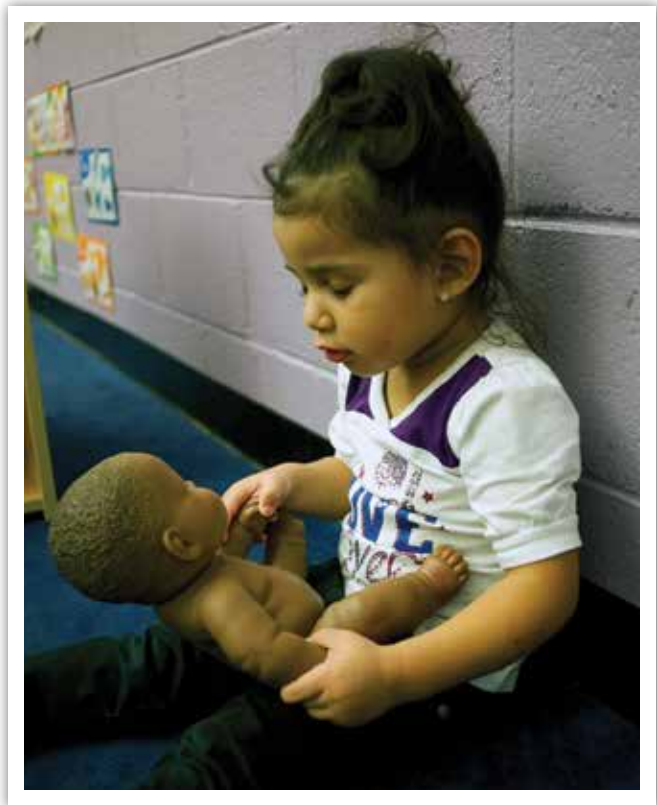
Federal Emergency Response Agency. Helping Children Cope with Disaster <http://www.fema.gov/news-release/2005/10/14/helping-children-cope-disaster>

School readiness begins with health!

- Wanting things only done his/her way
- Social regression
- Increased complaints (headaches, stomachaches)
- Intense preoccupation with the details of the event
- Wanting to always talk about what happened
- Fear that the event might happen again
- Not paying attention, being restless
- Moody, depressed, or irritable
- Playing in violent ways
- Hitting you or others
- More tantrums
- Clinginess with teachers, caregivers, or yourself
- Regression, or going back to an earlier stage of development
- Bedwetting or other toileting issues
 - Baby talk
 - Wanting to be carried or rocked
- Re-creating the event, without prompting by staff or mental health consultant
 - Playing out or drawing the event
 - Repeatedly talking about it
- Overreacting to minor bumps or falls
- Changes in behavior (not wanting to eat, angry outbursts, decreased attention, withdrawal, wetting the bed, having bad dreams)
- Over- or under-reacting to physical contact, sudden movements, or loud sounds such as sirens and slamming doors
- Anxiety and worry
- New fears and/or fears about safety
- Asking questions and making statements about the event

What you might see (in addition to those listed above) in your older children

- Strong angry or sad feelings
- Acting out in school
- Poor grades
- Fighting with friends
- Wanting to be alone
- Behaving as if he or she has no feelings
- Disobeying, talking back, or getting into fights
- Drinking or using drugs, hanging out in groups and getting into trouble



Additional information about children's responses to trauma and disasters is available from the following resources:

- American Academy of Pediatrics Promoting Adjustment and Helping Children Cope <http://www.aap.org/disasters/adjustment>
- The Youngest Victims: Disaster Preparedness to Meet Children's Needs <http://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/Children-and-Disasters/Documents/Youngest-Victims-Final.pdf>
- Office of the Administration for Children & Families Early Childhood Disaster-Related Resources <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohsepr/early-childhood>
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network <http://www.nctsn.org>

If you see changes in your child, tell your child's teacher or home visitor. It is important that you and your child get the support. Your Head Start/Early Head Start teacher and/or mental health consultant can help you find resources that can help.