

Helping Children and Families



Louisiana Rural Trauma Services Center and
Department of Psychiatry

Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center
New Orleans

CopewithHurricanes

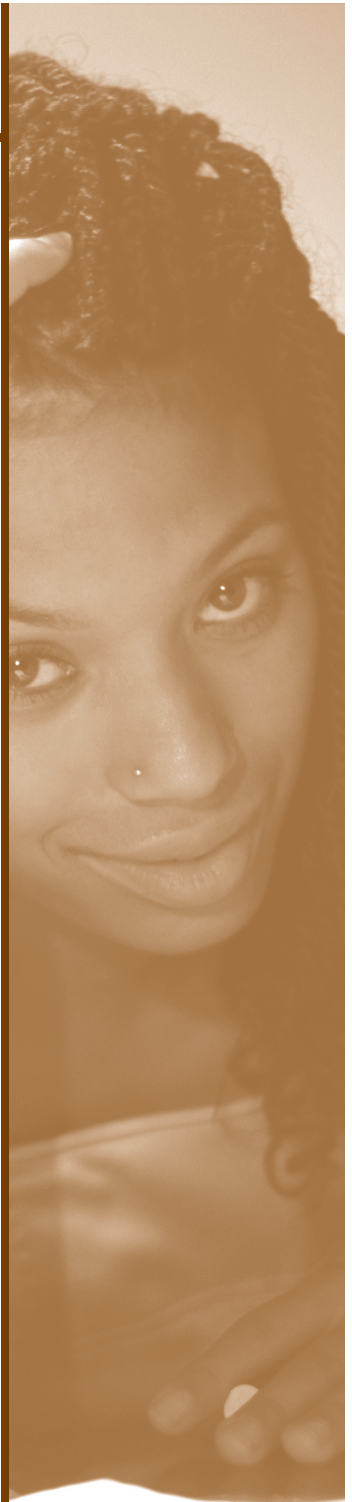
CopewithHurricanes

When children are exposed to a traumatic event such as a damaging hurricane, they depend on adults, especially their parents, to protect them and help them make sense of what has happened to their world. Parents need to be aware of some of the ways their children might react and be able to listen to them and hear their concerns. They also need to help them feel safe. However, loss of trust in adults and new fears are common after traumatic events. If parents are also affected, it is important for them to take care of themselves, too. And for both, it is often important to find support for themselves and their children by reaching out to others.

Reactions to traumatic events are difficult to predict. They may occur immediately after the event or days and even weeks later. They may remind children (or adults) about earlier traumas and can make the reactions more severe. Children's reactions to the traumatic event will be affected strongly by those of their parents. Children's reactions vary at different ages. Some of the common reactions of children are listed on the next page. If any of the behaviors or feelings do not lessen or go away over time, it is important to seek professional help. Doing so can be very helpful for children experiencing such problems and allows them to get back on a normal path. Without such help, the feelings and behaviors are likely to worsen.

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Possible Responses for children who have experienced a damaging hurricane or who have suffered a significant loss as a result of this traumatic event:

Behavior Changes

- Fear of being separated from parent; refusal to return to school or go to a new school
- Persistent fears related to the hurricane
- Re-living and re-experiencing traumatic events in the hurricane
- New fears not related to the hurricane or being afraid of things that they weren't afraid of before
- More clingy behaviors
- Not wanting to leave a safe environment or family/trusted adult
- Anxiety and hyper-vigilance (jumpy, scared)
- New fears unrelated to the event and being afraid of things that have recently mastered

- Behavior problems: misbehaving in school or home in ways not typical for child
- More aggressive behaviors
- Loss of concentration
- Startled easily, jumpy, scared, or expecting something bad to happen at any moment
- Withdrawal from family and friends, sadness, decreased activity
- More crying, irritability, tantrums
- Aimless motion, disorganized behaviors, and/or freezing
- Avoiding situations or reminders of the hurricane
- Showing little emotion; feeling numb
- Sleep disturbances, night waking, nightmares that persist
- Less ability to tolerate frustration
- Physical complaints (stomach aches, headaches) with no apparent physical cause



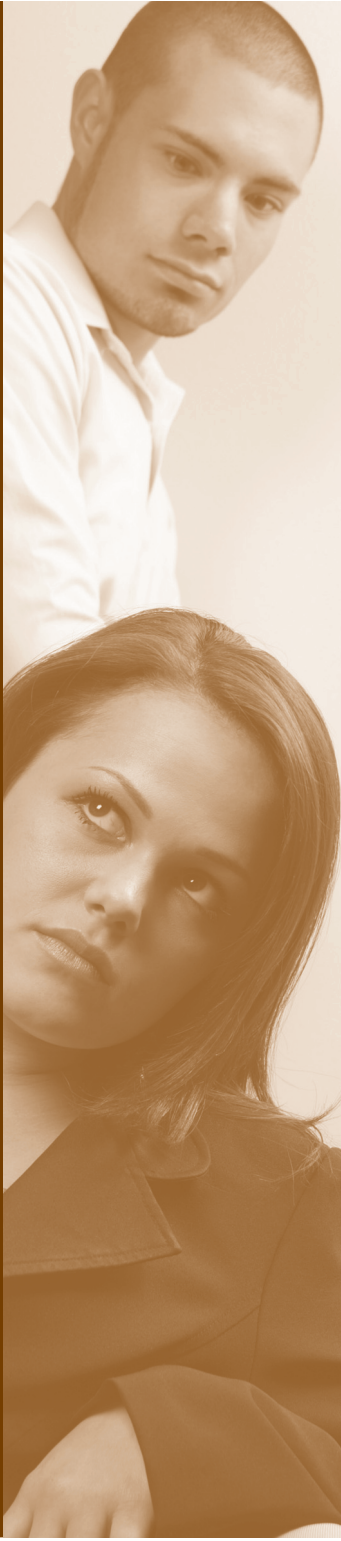


How Can Parents and Other Adults Help Traumatized Children?

- Show them you are available to listen.
- Use a calm tone of voice.
- Reassure children that they will be safe.

Even if it is difficult for the adult who also may be affected, it is important for the child to be able to feel safe. Younger children tend to think that the world revolves around them, so they might be afraid that something they thought or did caused bad things to happen. They need a reassurance that is not the case.

- Don't minimize the child's feelings, as in "Stop being a baby; don't cry."
- Follow the child's lead:
 - If the child wants to talk, listen.
 - If the child wants to be held, do so.
 - If the child is clingy, be patient.
- Allow children to show their fears; give support.
- Help children identify their feelings and try to give them realistic reassurance they will be safe and okay.



How Can Parents and Other Traumatized Adults Help Themselves?

It is very important that adults help themselves when they are affected by the hurricane. If they are also parents, getting support and assistance from schools, clergy, and mental health professionals may be particularly important, as they will be better able to listen to their children and give them the understanding and support that they need to heal.

What can adults do for themselves?

- Return to day-to-day routines and structure as soon as possible.
- Spend time with others.
- Seek support from friends and colleagues.
- Keep a journal.
- Participate in activities that may distract you or feel good to you.
- Try to be patient with others who are also under stress.
- Give yourself permission to feel what you are feeling, like moody, nervous, tired, or blue.
- Try not to make any major life decisions or changes during a stressful time.
- Take charge of the things you can and make decisions as needed to regain control over your daily life.
- Try to rest and eat balanced and regular meals.

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