

Parent Guidelines for Helping Children after an Earthquake

Being in an earthquake is very frightening, and the days, weeks, and months following are very stressful. Your children and family will recover over time, especially with the support of your relatives, friends, and your community. But different families may have different experiences during and after the earthquake, including the experience of aftershocks which may continue for several months. How long it takes to recover will depend on what happened to you and your family during and after the earthquake and the extent of damage and loss. Some children or their family members may have been seriously injured and will require medical treatment and long-term rehabilitation. Some families will return to normal routines over time, while others may struggle with damage to their home and possessions, with access to medical care, and increased financial strain. Many families will have lost loved ones. Children may react differently to the earthquake and its aftermath depending on their age and prior experiences. Parents should expect that children may respond in different ways and should be supportive and understanding of different reactions.

Children's reactions to the earthquake and its aftermath are strongly influenced by how their parents, relatives, teachers, and other caregivers cope. They often turn to these adults for information, comfort, and help. There are many reactions that are common among children. These generally diminish with time, but knowing about them can help you be prepared.

Common Reactions

- Feelings of anxiety, fear, and worry about the safety of self and others:
 - Children may have increased fears and worries about separation from family
 - Young children may cling to their parents, siblings, or teachers more
- Fears that another earthquake or aftershock will occur
- Anxiety about the safety of their home and school buildings
- Changes in behavior:
 - Increased activity level
 - Decreased concentration and attention
 - Increased irritability
 - Withdrawal
 - Emotional outbursts
- Physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches, aches and pains)
- Changes in school-related work habits and behavior in the family
- Staying focused on the earthquake (talking repeatedly about it – young children may “play” the event)
- Strong reactions to reminders of the earthquake (destroyed buildings, debris, cracks in walls, media reports)

- Increased sensitivity to sounds (sirens, loud noises, things falling or crashing)
- Changes in sleep and appetite
- Lack of interest in usual activities, including playing with friends
- Regressive behavior in young children (returning to baby talk, bedwetting, tantrums)
- Increased high-risk behavior in adolescents (drinking, substance abuse, self-injurious behaviors)

Things I Can Do for Myself

- **Take care of yourself.** Do your best to drink plenty of water, eat regularly, and get enough sleep.
- **Help each other.** Take time with other adult relatives, friends, or members of the community to talk or help each other, including being involved in religious or spiritual activities.
- **Put off major decisions.** Avoid making any unnecessary life-altering decisions during this time.
- **Give yourself a break.** Try not to overdo clean-up activities. Take time for activities you or your family enjoys.

Things I Can Do for My Child

- **Spend time talking with your children.** Let children know that it is OK to ask questions and express their concerns. Issues may need to be discussed more than one time and you should remain open to answering new questions and providing clarifications.
- **Find time to have these conversations.** Use family times (such as mealtimes) to talk about what is happening in the family as well as in the community. Answer questions briefly and honestly, but also ask your children for their opinions and ideas. For younger children, follow conversations about the earthquake with a favorite story or a family activity to help them feel more safe and calm.
- **Be a role model.** Changes in living conditions can be extremely stressful for children. They will take cues on how to handle situations from their parents. Remaining calm will be important during chaotic times.
- **Encourage your children.** Help children take care of themselves by encouraging them to drink enough water, eat regularly, and get enough rest. Be sure there is a balance of quiet and physical activities.
- **Help children feel safe.** This includes telling children what to do during an aftershock and explaining how you are keeping the family safe. This may need to be repeated many times.
- **Maintain routines.** Children feel more safe and secure with structure and routine. As much as possible, stick to everyday routines (including mealtimes, bedtime).
- **Maintain expectations.** Stick with family rules, such as rules about good behavior and respect for others.
- **Limit media exposure.** Protect your child from too much media viewing about the earthquake recovery, including those in newspapers, on the Internet, or on television.
- **Calm worries about friends' safety.** As phone service may be disrupted, communication will be difficult. Reassure your children that their friends' parents are taking care of them just as they are being cared for by you.

- **Communicate about community recovery.** Reassure children that things are being done in their community to restore electricity and water, to remove debris, and to help families find permanent housing.
- **Encourage children to help.** Children recover and cope better when they feel they are helping. Find ways your children can help, including with clean-up or family activities.
- **Reduce boredom.** Children may complain of boredom as their daily activities have been disrupted. Try to find community programs that have child-friendly activities that your children can be involved in.
- **Be patient.** Children may be more distracted and need added reminders or extra help with chores or homework once school is in session.
- **Give support at bedtime.** Children may become anxious when they separate from their parents, especially at bedtime. Try to spend more time with your children with such activities as reading a book. It's okay to make a temporary arrangement for young children to sleep with you, but with the understanding that they will go back to normal sleeping arrangements at a future date.
- **Monitor adult conversations.** Be aware of what is being said during adult conversations about the earthquake and its aftermath. Children may misinterpret what they hear and can be frightened unnecessarily about something they do not understand.
- **Seek professional help.** If children have continued difficulties for a couple of months after the earthquake, parents should consult a doctor or mental health professional.
- **Get your child's teacher involved.** If there has been a serious injury or death in the family or if your child is having difficulties, let your child's teacher know so the school can be of help.
- **Keep things hopeful.** Even in the most difficult situations, identify some positive aspect and try to stay hopeful for the future. A positive and optimistic outlook helps children see the good things in the world around them.

Further information about children, families, and earthquake can be found at the website of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, www.NCTSN.org.