

SUPPORTING CHILDREN IN THE SOUTH CAROLINA FLOOD AFTERMATH: IDEAS FOR PARENTS

Children are watching and/or experiencing the trauma and stress happening in our towns related to the “1,000 year” flood. Some have watched and listened to what’s happening to their neighbors and friends on TV. Others have experienced it first hand. They saw their homes filling with water and had to wade or swim to safety in deep floodwater. Others were rescued by boat or were airlifted from their homes, leaving behind all that is familiar and all of their favorite things. Some are having mandatory evacuations! Some have returned to find a home that is not there or one that is very damaged.

When you have lost your home, maybe a pet, and your possessions, how do you remain calm and positive? When you return to your home and see ruined toys, clothes and furniture outside of the house and the interior filled with mud, water, and debris, how do you find ways to move forward? *How do we talk to children about the flood devastation and its aftermath? How do we ease the worries in their mind? In most situations, it will be very hard, but there are things parents can do!*

Remember, children do not have the full cognitive development to understand natural disasters, the devastation that follows, and the stress related to the potentially long-term recovery. But, our children take cues from the adults and caregivers around them. Whether your own family’s or a friend’s situation is overwhelming or minimal related to the flooding that has happened, *here are some tips for talking to your children about what’s happening and some ideas for managing life to help keep them as calmly as possible:*

- If you have had to leave your home, your first priority as a parent will be making sure that the shelter or new living place is safe, especially for young children who may be exploring the new environment. Also, you will need to determine how to provide food and water for them. Your children may have to spend a lot of time indoors until outdoor areas are cleaned and safe again. *Remember that it is never safe to play in floodwaters, as there may be significant bacterial contamination and potentially dangerous animals like snakes. Patience will be crucial* so that your children will take your lead and approach the situation calmly.
- You do not need to provide a reason why this tragedy has happened. It is enough to say that we don’t fully understand, and again, try to focus on the positive, be calm, meditate, and/or pray. **In this moment, teach your children that our lives are more important than anything we own.**
- **Be careful** with TV images and reports, videos, social media, and smart phone photos that you share with your children, especially young children in preschool, children in early elementary school, and children with special needs. *These children do not need to “see” cars being covered by water and young children being rescued. It is too scary for them! You can tell them that the water from the flood is not good for driving and that heroes are helping families who are stuck in the floods (very simply), but they do not need to see this footage.*
 - *If your child is older, let them watch TV or see photos and videos only with you by their side to talk about it and discuss it with a way to look at the positive of the situation (such as an emphasis on being safe and caring for others). Even older elementary school children need to have a supportive adult with them to help them talk through and understand what is going on during a traumatic event such as the flood.*
 - *Older children and adolescents often do well and better if they “know” what’s happening around them, especially when their friends are going through a more devastating experience. Again, it is important to watch and talk about all of this with them.*
- Parents believe that they must be “strong” and “brave” at all times for their children during traumatic events. However, this does not mean that you need to hide your feelings. **It is OK to be upset in front of your children.** This is a very distressing and possibly traumatic experience for your family and friends. You can acknowledge this and still show resilience, practice being calm, and model talking to your child about some positive aspects of this very difficult situation. For example:

○ WE ARE SAFE. OUR FAMILY IS SAFE.	○ WE HAVE FRIENDS AND FAMILY HELPING US.	○ PEOPLE IN THE COMMUNITY ARE HELPING US LIKE THE POLICE, FIRE FIGHTERS, UTILITY WORKERS, ETC.
○ WE ARE TOGETHER. OUR FAMILY IS TOGETHER.	○ LOOK HOW MANY PEOPLE CARE!	○ WE WILL BE OK!
- Children will have lots of worries and “stories” and thoughts happening in their mind about all going on related to the actual trauma with the flood experience and it’s aftermath. Here are some examples with ideas on how to handle each one:
 - They may be worried that any continued rain means another flood.
 - **Acknowledge their feelings.** *Yes, seeing the rain scares me, too. But, the flood is over.*
 - They may be worried that their home is going to get ruined or taken away again.
 - **Recognize how scary this is, tell them your feelings.** *Yes, me, too. I keep thinking that it’s going to happen again to our house (our belongings, our family, etc.). Isn’t it a scary feeling to be trapped, but let’s work together to feel safe and calm!*
 - They may re-live their experience when they hear someone talking, see a news report on TV, or even think about what happened. They may tell you about it, or they may keep it to themselves. **Be proactive, check in with them, and let them know it’s OK.**
 - **Comfort your child.** Hug them, tell them you will keep them safe, and mostly be calm and quiet close to them. Model breathing calmly.
 - **Do not tell your child “not to feel” the way they feel. Let the child have the emotion.** You can have the emotion with your child. Don’t let it happen for an extended period of time, but show them how to move forward by looking for the positive and focusing on the fact that they are safe now. Here is another time to take calm breaths. Model this to your child as opposed to telling them to do it.

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- **Ask your child to draw or paint a picture of what happened and to put in all details.** Then, your child can talk about his/her drawings to help work through all that is going through their mind.
 - *Some kids want to keep these drawings. You can even build a memory book, and you can put the pictures and photos in the book with labels. Be sure that the book ends with the positive—the safe place with their family and friends.*
 - *Some kids don't want to keep the stressful memories. If they want to ball up and "throw" away the stressful memory after they've gotten it out in drawing, it's OK.*
- **Ask your child to journal and write about his/her experience.** He/she can do it "play by play" for what happened. He/she may or may not put in his/her feelings. As you read it with your child, ask about his/her feelings. Did that make you scared? What did it feel like when you were safe? **End your discussion with a positive.**
- **Redirect your child positively by reaching out to others and trying to do things to help those who are in need.** Maybe young children could share a toy or play a game with another child who has also experienced loss associated with the flooding. Or, he/she can draw a picture saying "thinking of you" to share with those in shelters. Elementary age children can choose some of their own toys and clothes to give away to other children who lost belongings in the flood. Older elementary school children and adolescents can help at food distributions areas, be there to support others at places of worship, etc. **Remember the golden rule, treat others the way you would have them treat you.**
- **Children with special needs will have very similar experiences in thinking about and understanding the flood, but they may need more calmness, more patience, and more structure. To be extra helpful and proactive:**
 - *Get back on a routine for getting through the day with some activities the child enjoys. If there are no toys or other familiar objects, remember the power of music. Singing songs can be soothing to both children and adults. If there are no books, try making up stories about the child or topics that are interesting to the child.*
 - *Continue to expect your child to follow certain directions, and praise them for being good listeners. It is reassuring and calming to the child when you re-establish that life has a certain rhythm with some expectations that the child will do certain things as asked.*
 - *Art activities and encouragement to help others as described above will also be helpful to your child.*
- **Try using mindfulness practice to help yourself and your children stay positive.** For example, consider the gift of being with each other. Think about how we can make a choice to use each breath to have a sense of peace in the present. As you focus on breathing in and out slowly and deeply, notice what it means to simply be safe. Even 5 – 10 minutes of mindfulness practice each day will have a very calming effect that will help you and your children better manage the stress of recovery. For young children, link the breathing practice to something like taking a step, pausing to notice what is happening around you as you take a breath, and then taking another step, etc.
- **Try to get in touch with other members of your church, synagogue, etc. This connection with others who share your religious beliefs can be very comforting. And, you can get support, hope, and strength in faith from your tradition. For example:** "...but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength; they will fly up on wings like eagles; they will run and not be tired; they will walk and not be weary" (Isaiah 40:31).

There is no way to plan for how your child will process the devastating experiences that are going on right now and that will continue for an unspecified time period pending your situation. No matter how calm you try to be, we can't always predict a child's reaction, now or in the future. So, here are some final tips as you support your children:

- *Flood devastation and recovery is stressful. Model how to be calm (remember calm breathing), how to be positive, and how to cope with resilience.*
- *Encourage art, writing, and play to help children "process" and get out all their feelings and emotions of what is going on. Let them express themselves through kid activities (see above for specifics). Remember music, singing, and dancing too!*
- *If your child needs professional help because all of this is too difficult, you can contact your school psychologist, guidance counselor or mental health experts in the community. Symptoms that may warrant professional guidance include:*
 - INCREASED DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIORS, HYPERACTIVITY, & IRRITABILITY
 - SLEEP DISRUPTIONS
 - WITHDRAWAL
 - INCREASED DEPENDENCY/CLINGINESS
 - FREQUENT STOMACHACHES, HEADACHES OR OTHER HEALTH COMPLAINTS
- *Remember that taking care of your own feelings and managing stress as well as possible will be the best way to take care of your child. If you need support, reach out to your own support network and consider contacting mental health professionals who work with adults if needed.*
- *Finally, be aware that some children will seem to cope quite well initially but may begin acting out weeks or months later. Staying alert to your own and your child's emotional needs will be the best way to help everyone in your family recover from this disaster.*

For More Information To Support Your Children

- ❖ *Helping Children After a Natural Disaster: Information for Parents and Teachers (2003) at http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/naturaldisaster_ho.pdf*
- ❖ *What To Do After a Flood is Over at http://www.emergency.cdc.gov/disasters/floods/pdf/stress_plain.pdf*
- ❖ *Clinical Recommendations Regarding Return of Children to Areas Impacted by Flooding and/or Hurricanes (2005) at <https://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/Children-and-Disasters/Documents/Hurricanes-ReturnofChildren.pdf>*
- ❖ *Talking to Children About Disasters at <https://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/aap-health-initiatives/Children-and-Disasters/Pages/Talking-to-Children-About-Disasters.aspx>*
- ❖ *Floods: National Child Traumatic Stress Network at <http://netn.org/trauma-types/natural-disasters/floods>*