



UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS EXTENSION
Disaster Resources



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Children, Stress, and Natural Disasters: School Activities for Children

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Giving children outlets for them to share their experiences and express their concerns and fears can sometimes make them feel better. The process of expressing or **diffusing** these feelings can be helpful for several reasons:

- Expressing fears or concerns can sometimes relieve tension or anxiety,
- Telling and retelling their story may help children create a sense of order, coherence, or control over events that seem chaotic, confusing, or overwhelming,
- Hearing other children's stories may help them realize that they are not alone in their fears or concerns,
- The interactions between children and teachers, or between children that come with the sharing of experiences or feelings can build a sense of security and trust.

The Marin County Community Mental Health Services and the Santa Cruz County Mental Health suggest these activities:

Preschool and Elementary School Activities

1. Making toys and materials that encourage play reenactment of children's experiences and observations during a disaster can be helpful to them in integrating experiences. These might include fire, rescue, and dump trucks, ambulances, bulldozers, or building blocks. Play with puppets or dolls could also help children ventilate feelings about what has occurred. (Preschool, Early Elementary)
2. Physical activity can be a good way to relieve tension and anxiety for children as well as adults. Physical contact during times of stress can give them a sense of security. Games that include

physical activity and contact may be helpful. Some examples are (Preschool, Early Elementary):

- Ring around the Rosie
- London Bridge
- Duck, Duck, Goose

3. Having a child draw a picture about a disaster is a good way to initiate expression in some children. You can ask children to draw whatever comes to their minds, or you could give them a question or topic to draw about. Talking about the picture later with a teacher or in a small group may allow them to vent their experiences and to discover that others share their fear (See #7 below). (Preschool, Elementary).
4. "Short stories" written (Elementary) or dictated (Preschool, Early Elementary) to an adult about their experience of the disaster can help a child verbalize fears as well as get back in touch with previous positive associations about a disruption.
5. A group mural or collage on topics like "what happened to your house (or school or neighborhood)" or "when the big storm hit" followed by small group discussions may also be helpful (see #7 below). (Preschool, Elementary)
6. Help or encourage children to develop skits or puppet shows about what happened in the disaster. Encourage them to include anything positive about the experience as well as those aspects that were frightening or disconcerting. (Elementary)
7. Students can draw, write, or talk about the thing they best remember, or respond to questions or topics such as:

- What happened after the storm hit?
- How did you help your family during or after the disaster?
- How could you help your family if you were in another disaster?
- Did anything good or positive happen because of the disaster? Did you learn anything from what happened to you?

Although group discussions are a good vehicle for validating children's feelings about their experiences, it is important to end the discussion on a positive note by focusing on things that promote a sense of security, mastery, or preparedness. This may come from students themselves, and teachers can reinforce or elaborate on these points. Some positive outcomes might include:

- Feeling closer to family and friends
- Meeting new friends or caring adults
- Learning new skills or getting a sense of responsibility, strength, or mastery
- Having the community pull together to deal with the crisis
- Seeing that people want to help

1. Encourage class activities in which children can *organize* or *build* projects (scrapbooks, replicas, etc.) to give them a sense of mastery and a chance to organize what may be chaotic and confusing

events. (Elementary)

2. Encourage "disaster" games in which children set rules and develop outcomes which can allow them to develop feelings of mastery over events. (Elementary)
3. Use coloring books (Preschool, Early Elementary) or other books (Elementary) about disasters to stimulate children's drawing, writing, or talking about their experiences.

The American Red Cross publishes a series of coloring books designed for use by children ages 3 - 10 and an adult or older youth "helper" who can discuss the child's feelings about disasters and the recovery process. Each book is also available in Spanish. Titles include:

- After the Earthquake Coloring Book (ARC 2201)
Despues del terremoto Libro de colores (ARC 2201S)
- After the Flood Coloring Book (ARC 2204)
Despues de la unundacion Libro de colores (ARC 2204S)
- After the Storm Coloring Book (ARC 2206)
Despues de la tepested Libro de colores (ARC 2206S)
- After the Tornado Coloring Book (ARC 2205)
Despues del tornado Libro de colores (ARC 2205S)

Other books that can be used are listed in a [bibliography of children's literature on disasters](#).

Middle School/Junior High - High School Activities

You can use many of the basic principles outlined in the suggestions for younger children with older students.

Activities might also include:

1. Using art, music, or poetry to describe experiences and express feelings. Students might keep a journal or could *Expressing Feelings* write and produce a play or a video. Collections of student work could be published or performed for the class, school, or the community.
2. Group discussions that allow students to express their feelings, to understand and be reassured that many of their reactions are normal and not "crazy", and help them come to an understanding of what the disaster means. It is important to focus on positive as well as negative outcomes, and on actions that can be taken as lessons from the disaster.

Supporting Material

[Examples and guidelines for activities.](#)

[Bibliography of children's literature on disasters.](#)

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