

## Helping Your Child Cope With Disaster:



This information is a cooperative effort between:

- [Gainesville Fire Rescue](#)
- [Alachua County Office of Emergency Management](#)
- [Florida Division of Emergency Management](#)
- [National Hurricane Center](#)
- [Alachua County Chapter - American Red Cross](#)

Our thanks to these agencies for their continued assistance.

### General:

It is normal for children to be afraid, especially after a hurricane or other major storm. The fear may last for an extended period and is best dealt with by kindness and understanding on the part of the parents and guardians. Children should be encouraged to talk about their feelings and otherwise express their fears through play, drawing, painting, or building using blocks or play dough.

Research indicates that children's fears vary according to age, maturity, and previous learning experiences. Four major fears common in children are: death, darkness, animals and abandonment. During a disaster, children would encounter three out of the four major fears. This will have an impact on their ability to cope for quite some time.

Another important aspect about children's fears is that fears may be intensified when adults back away from discussing the topic with children. Many families ban all painful topics from family conversation. Such strategies may intensify despair and negativity in children. To help children cope with fears, one of the most important steps adults can take is to talk with children. Encourage the communication process... it speeds the healing process along.

### *Following a disaster some children may:*

1. Be upset at the loss of a favorite blanket, teddy bear, etc.
2. Be angry. They may hit, throw, kick to show their anger.
3. Become more active and restless.
4. Be afraid of the disaster recurring. They may ask many times, "Will it come again?"
5. Be afraid to be left alone or afraid to sleep alone. Children may want to sleep with a parent or another person. They may have nightmares.
6. Behave as they did when younger. They may start sucking their thumb, wetting the bed, asking for a bottle, wanting to be held.
7. Have symptoms of illness such as nausea, vomiting, headaches, not wanting to eat, running a fever.
8. Be quiet and withdrawn, not wanting to talk about the experience.
9. Become upset easily -- crying and whining frequently.
10. Feel guilty that they caused the disaster because of some previous behavior.
11. Feel neglected by parents who are busy trying to clean up and rebuild their lives/homes.
12. Refuse to go to school or to child care arrangements. The child may not want to be out of the parent's sight.
13. Become afraid of loud noises, rain, storms.
14. Not show any outward sign of being upset. Some children may never show distress because they do not feel upset. Other children may not give evidence of being upset until several weeks or months later.

### Tips:

- Talk with your child, providing simple, accurate information to questions.
- Talk with your child about your own feelings.
- Listen to what your child says and how your child says it. Is there fear, anxiety, insecurity? Repeating the child's words may be very helpful, such as "You are afraid that or "You wonder if the storm will come again tonight." This helps both you and the child clarify feelings.
- Reassure your child, "We are together. We care about you. We will take care of you."
- You may need to repeat information and reassurances many times. Do not stop responding just because you told the child once or even 10 times.
- Hold your child. Provide comfort. Touching is important for children during this period. Close contact helps assure children that you are there for them and will not abandon them.
- Spend extra time putting your child to bed. Talk and offer assurance. Leave a night light on if that makes the child feel more secure.
- Observe your child at play. Listen to what is said and how the child plays. Frequently children express feelings of fear or anger while playing with dolls, trucks, or friends.
- Provide play experiences to relieve tension. Work with play dough, paint, play in water, etc. If children show a need to hit or kick, give them something safe like a pillow, ball, or balloon. Allow a safe, open space for them to play, if possible.
- If your child lost a meaningful toy or blanket, allow the child to mourn and grieve. It is all part of helping the young child cope with feelings about the disaster. In time, it may be helpful to replace the lost object.
- If you need help for your child, contact a community resource, such as the Alachua County Crisis Center at 264-6789.