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Children and Disaster: Part 1 Ages and Stages

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Issued January 2006

4 pages

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Children and Disaster: Part 1 Ages and Stages

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What is a disaster?

A disaster is a sudden and destructive event that has a specific onset caused by something or someone and negatively affects a group of people (Rubonis and Bickman, 1991).

There are many types of disasters in the world. Natural disasters occur as a result of the forces of nature, such as earthquakes, hurricanes, floods and mud slides.

Technological disasters are the result of human error or action, such as a chemical spill or an electrical blackout.

Man-made disasters are the result of the intentional actions of others, such as terrorism or a hostage situation.

Disaster situations can present a danger to children, not only to their physical safety but also to their mental health. Obviously, children who have a physical or emotional connection to a disaster are often the most affected.

But, research has shown that some children experience negative reactions to a disaster just from following media coverage of an event.

What children will understand about any particular disaster will vary. The feelings that are attached to a natural disaster might be quite different from those connected to a man-made disaster. Those who are directly affected will probably react differently than those who only hear about it. However, what children will understand and need to know is also related to their age, developmental stage, personality, temperament and life experiences. Though each individual child will be different, there are some generalizations that describe what children are like at different ages and stages of development. The information below briefly describes each stage of development and how that may affect children's understanding of disasters.



Infants and Toddlers: Newborn to 2 years of age

What we know about children this age:

Infants learn about the world through their relationships with others and how quickly and predictably their needs are met. If they are fed when hungry, changed when dirty, comforted when hurt or angry, they begin to trust their world and the important people in it. This sense of trust is what they build upon to feel safe and secure, loved and cared for throughout their lives.

Toddlers are very dependent upon and attached to the people who care for them. In spite of this, they spend most of their time and energy working toward achieving a sense of independence. They want to do things their own way, on their own time, and everyone near them knows it. Children this age are also very emotional. They are learning how it feels to be happy, sad, scared, lonely, angry and many other feelings, but they do not yet have the skills to handle these intense emotions well. In addition, because communication skills are just developing, they will express themselves primarily in nonverbal ways.

What children this age understand about disaster:

Infants and toddlers have very little understanding of world events happening around them. However, they are sensitive to the mood and responsiveness of their caregivers and any disruptions to their routines. If a caregiver is excessively worried, anxious or sad, even the youngest children will pick up on this and often become anxious or sad themselves.



Preschoolers: 3 to 5 years of age

What we know about children this age:

Preschool-aged children have active imaginations and trouble distinguishing between fantasy and reality. They also are unable to understand abstract concepts and language. Most of what they know to be true is based on what they see and hear. Because of this, concepts such as time, distance and location are confusing to children this age. Preschool children are becoming better able to communicate and ask many questions about things they do not understand. They also experience the range of human emotions but are

just learning the skills to manage these feelings effectively.

What children this age understand about disaster:

Preschool-aged children do not understand that what they see on television may be happening in a place that is far away. After all, media coverage brings world news right into their own home. Preschoolers also do not realize that single events are often rebroadcast time and time again. Instead, they think the same thing is happening over and over. Preschoolers view almost everything from their own perspective, including what they are seeing, hearing and learning about world events from their parents, other adults, peers and the media. When young children hear stories or see images of schools being bombed, houses being torn apart, or young children hurt and bleeding in hospitals, they worry that these kinds of things will happen to them, too. The most common fear of preschool-aged children is that something bad is going to happen to them or their parents.

School-aged Children: 6 to 12 years of age

What we know about children this age:

School-aged children are curious and imaginative. They like information and details and will often ask many questions to find out what they need to know. Though they are able to understand increasingly complex ideas, they still may have difficulty knowing the difference between fact and opinion, exaggeration and truth. They are concerned less about fantasy and pretend, and more about real-life events. Fears are very common among school-aged children. Younger school-aged children may still be afraid of monsters or the dark, while the older children often begin to fear things such as disaster and death. They also worry about the safety and security of themselves, their families and their friends. Peers are becoming very influential at this age, and school-aged children are beginning to learn skills to negotiate, resolve conflicts and solve problems peacefully.

What children this age understand about disaster:

School-aged children are beginning to understand some of what they see and hear. They tend to react with fear and anxiety, and they worry about the danger to themselves and others they care about. They also might begin to worry about death, particularly losing someone who is close to them. Many school-aged children also feel angry or sad because they understand the loss of life that comes with disaster, even if those who die are strangers to them. Because school-aged children are beginning to

understand complex ideas and details, they are interested in learning the how or why of the disaster. Yet, they still may have difficulty understanding how events of this magnitude can occur, especially when the disaster is a result of an intentional human action. School-aged children tend to see the world in absolutes, and they like rules. Things are either right or wrong, fair or unfair, good or bad. They are old enough to understand that someone's actions injured or killed people and know that they are not allowed to solve problems by hurting others. This contradiction in standards is hard for them to understand.

Adolescents: 13 to 17 Years of age

What we know about children this age:

Adolescents are trying to develop a clear sense of who they are and what they believe in. They need opportunities to explore issues and develop their own views, which may be very different from those of their parents or other important adults in their lives. Generally, they enjoy discussing moral and philosophical topics but may resist sharing their thoughts and feelings, especially with adults. Adolescents are abstract thinkers. They are better able to think things through and can consider multiple options and possibilities. They understand the idea of choices and consequences and are concerned about issues such as fairness and punishment, right and wrong. It is common for adolescents to be preoccupied with themselves, their appearances and/or their actions, although their peer group is very significant and influential. They may also use humor inappropriately and be insensitive to the needs of others. Adolescents generally feel invincible, or as if nothing bad will ever happen to them.



What children this age understand about disaster:

Many adolescents will be able to discuss world events on the same level as an adult. They are beginning to examine their philosophical ideologies and may have many questions and concerns. Disastrous events such as these also may threaten their sense of security and hope for the future. Some adolescents respond to disaster by engaging in risk-taking behavior as a way to assure themselves and others that they are truly invincible. Others see situations such as these as an opportunity to become involved in community service and mobilize to do something positive for others.

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