

Talking to Children About Disasters

You should not worry that talking about disasters will make children fearful. On the contrary, children are usually more frightened by what is whispered or not mentioned aloud than by matter-of-fact discussion. Let children speak freely about what scares or puzzles them—for example, “What will happen to my puppy if we have to evacuate?” “If there’s a flood and I’m at school, I won’t be able to find you.” Try to answer questions and address concerns with concrete, easy-to-follow information.

When helping children learn how to prepare for, respond safely during, and recover from a disaster, it is important to adapt your discussions, instructions, and practice drills to their skills and abilities. Be aware that young children can easily confuse messages such as “drop, cover, and hold on” (response during an earthquake) and “stop, drop, and roll” (response if your clothes catch on fire).

Tell children that a disaster is something that happens that could hurt people, cause damage, or cut off utilities, such as water, telephones, or electricity. Explain to them that nature sometimes provides “too much of a good thing”—fire, rain, wind, snow. Talk about typical effects of disasters that children can relate to, such as loss of electricity, water, and telephone service.

Give examples of several disasters that could happen in your community. Help children recognize the warning signs for each. Discussing disaster ahead of time reduces fear and anxiety and lets everyone know how to respond.

Be prepared to answer children’s questions about scary things that they have heard about or seen on television, such as terrorist attacks. Give constructive information about how they can be prepared to protect themselves.

Teach children how and when to call for help. Teach them to call 9-1-1 or your local emergency telephone number. At home, post emergency telephone numbers by all phones and explain when to call each number. Include the work numbers and cell phone numbers of household members. Even very young children can be taught how and when to call for emergency assistance. If a child cannot read, make an emergency phone number chart with pictures or icons for 911, “daddy,” and “mommy” that may help the child identify the correct number to call.

Tell children that in a disaster there are many people who can help them. Talk about ways that an emergency manager, American Red Cross volunteer, police officer, firefighter, teacher, neighbor, doctor, or utility worker might help after a disaster.

Teach children to call your out-of-town contact in case they are separated from the family and cannot reach family members in an emergency. Tell them, “If no one answers, leave a voice message if possible and then call the alternative contact.” Help them memorize the telephone numbers, and write them down on a card that they can keep with them.

Quiz your children every six months so they will remember where to meet, what phone numbers to call, and safety rules.

Explain that when people know what to do and practice in advance, everyone is able to take care of themselves better in emergencies.

By including all members of your household—regardless of age—in disaster preparedness discussions, you will emphasize each person’s importance as a member of the safety team.