

# Helping Children Cope with Disaster

---

**Release Date: Nov 24, 2020**

Disasters cause tremendous change in the lives of survivors. Parents and guardians may want to consider ways to approach their children as they cope with the changes in their lives at home and in school due to Hurricanes Laura and Delta.

## **Addressing the Emotional Impacts of a Disaster**

It can be upsetting for children who have experienced loss and destruction firsthand, or who have watched it on television. Children may have lost pets, favorite toys or other cherished belongings. Children need to be reassured that grieving is okay and encouraged to discuss their feelings.

Children may have concerns they cannot express clearly. Their reactions may vary, depending on age, but there are some common responses to stress. Signs to look for in children who may need help coping with the aftermath of recent hurricanes include:

**Birth through six years:** Infants and very young children may be more irritable, crying more than usual, and need more comfort than before the disaster. Preschool and kindergarten children can feel helpless and frightened about separation from their parents. They may resume thumb sucking or bedwetting.

**Seven through 10 years:** Older children may become preoccupied with the disaster and want to talk about it continually. They may fear the disaster will happen again and may have strong angry or sad feelings. Children who act out may be expressing grief and trauma. A child may behave as if he or she has no feelings. This numbness can be an emotional shield that protects the child from experiencing pain.

**Eleven through 18 years:** Teenagers may react with risk-taking behaviors, such as reckless driving or alcohol and drug abuse. Teenagers can be overwhelmed by their intense emotions and be unable to talk about them.



**FEMA**

Page 1 of 3

Here are some tips to help children recover and cope with their situation:

- **Limit TV time:** Intense media coverage of disasters can frighten young children and disturb teenagers as well.
- **Keep to a routine:** Structure can make them feel more at ease or provide a sense of familiarity. When schools and childcare open again, help them to return to normal activities including going back to class, sports and play groups.
- **Make time for them:** Help kids to understand that they are safe and secure by talking, playing and doing other family activities with them. To help younger children feel safe and calm, read a favorite book or play a relaxing family game.

Ask them questions about how they feel about their changed situation. Spend some time talking to them about the disaster, let them know it is okay to ask questions and to share their worries and reactions. It is also good to let children know, without overwhelming them with information, what is happening in the family, with their school, and in the community.

Parents and guardians should answer questions briefly and honestly and ask their children for their opinions and ideas. Visit [nctsn.org/trauma-types/natural-disasters](https://nctsn.org/trauma-types/natural-disasters) for more ideas on how to reassure children they are safe.

### **Useful Links to Resources:**

The Center for Disease Control website has useful resources for children at <https://www.cdc.gov/childrenindisasters/index.html>

The CDC has created an activity book to offer parents and educators an interactive way to talk to kids about how to cope after a disaster. It can be used in schools, communities, and families to help children talk about their feelings after a disaster and learn positive ways to express their emotions in uncertain times. [https://www.cdc.gov/phpr/readywrigley/documents/RW\\_Coping\\_After\\_a\\_Disaster\\_508.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/phpr/readywrigley/documents/RW_Coping_After_a_Disaster_508.pdf)

FEMA has a section of its newly updated website <https://www.ready.gov/kids> devoted to helping children understand disasters, and prepare for a storm with games and stories, in English and Spanish. FEMA website: [www.ready.gov/coping-with-disaster](http://www.ready.gov/coping-with-disaster) and [www.fema.gov/children-and-disasters](http://www.fema.gov/children-and-disasters).



**FEMA**

Save the Children: go to [www.savethechildren.org](http://www.savethechildren.org) and search “Tips to Help Kids Cope with Disasters”.

American Academy of Pediatrics: go to [www.healthychildren.org](http://www.healthychildren.org) and search

- ■ “Helping your Child Cope”
- ■ “Talking to Children about Disasters”
- ■ “How Children of Different Ages Respond to Disasters”

National Child Traumatic Stress Network: [www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org)

The Environmental Protection Agency is hosting a series of workshops:

<https://www.epa.gov/la/public-meetings-and-events-louisiana>. For more information, contact [Moraima Barron](mailto:Moraima Barron) at [mobarron@tthusc.edu](mailto:mobarron@tthusc.edu) or at 915-215-6110.

For the latest information on Hurricane Delta, visit [fema.gov/disaster/4570](http://fema.gov/disaster/4570). For the latest information on Hurricane Laura, visit [fema.gov/disaster/4559](http://fema.gov/disaster/4559). Or, follow the FEMA Region 6 Twitter account at [twitter.com/FEMARegion6](https://twitter.com/FEMARegion6).

