

As floods devastate the Mississippi River region, fires rage in California, and memories of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath remain fresh in everyone's minds, it's worth asking: What will you do in case of disaster? And how can you help your children prepare?

By Winnie Yu

Getting Children Ready for the Worst



Floods. Wildfires. Tornadoes. For many Americans, natural disasters are a fact of life, a calamity waiting to happen at the will of Mother Nature. For others, these catastrophes are simply stories on the evening news, events that happen to other people, not them.

It's easy to think that disasters won't happen to you. In reality, 60 percent of all Americans have been impacted, including children under 18 — who make up a quarter of the U.S. population.

For children, these disasters — even the prospect of them — are downright frightening. But with proper planning, parents can help calm these fears. “The key is being prepared and to include the kids in your plan,” says Floyd Buras, M.D., FAAP, a clinical assistant professor of pediatrics at Louisiana State University and a pediatrician in New Orleans, a city still reeling from the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. “If they know what they have to do, there will be less anxiety.”

Know Your Enemy

The first thing to do is to become aware of the potential disasters in your



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community and to learn about the kinds of services available in the event of an emergency. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, you can get that information by contacting your local Red Cross or your state or metro emergency management office and asking:

- What types of disasters are most likely to happen in my area and how do I prepare for each one?
- What do community warning signals sound like, and what do I do if I hear them?
- Where can pets go if they aren't allowed at an emergency shelter?
- What kind of help is available for children with special needs, the elderly, or disabled?

You should also contact child care programs, schools, work sites, and any other place family members spend time and learn about their disaster plans. Armed with this information, you're now ready to start developing your family's disaster plan and to talk intelligently with your children about what to do if disaster strikes.

Preparation is Key

The best thing parents can do is come up with a plan before disaster strikes. “You don't want to be there 24 hours before landfall, asking ‘Are we

going to leave or stay?’ Dr. Buras says. “The thing that drives people crazy is not knowing what to do. You can't be indecisive with this.”

Of course, the type of planning you do will depend largely on where you live and the types of disasters that may occur. Children who live in California for instance, need to know where to go if an earthquake strikes; children in the Midwest need to know how to get to higher ground during a flood.

One thing everybody needs is a disaster supplies kit. The kit should contain items you'd need in the event you're without water or power for several days, such as food, water, medicine, and cash. (See sidebar for some kit basics.) Dr. Buras says you might also ask your children to pack a small bag of their most precious belongings.

Make sure to teach your children what to do in the event there is a disaster. Show them where to go in the house, and where to meet up if you have to go outdoors. Post emergency phone numbers near your phone, and designate an out-of-town relative or friend as a contact person. Teach your kids how to spot signs of danger, call for help, and shut off utilities. Show them how to reach the family contact person if they become separated from you during a disaster.

It's also important to have a destination in mind if there's a chance your family will be evacuated. Whether it's grandma's house or a hotel in

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Quick Tips: Take it With You

Here's a partial list of must-have items for your emergency supplies kit:

- Water
- Ready-to-eat foods, such as canned foods, cereal, granola bars, bread, and crackers in a waterproof bag or container, and peanut butter and jelly
- Powdered or single-serve drinks
- Infant formula and diapers if needed
- Change of clothing for each child
- Battery-powered radio and flashlights
- Extra batteries
- First-aid kit
- Prescription medicines
- Immunization records
- Cash and credit card
- Personal identification
- Spare set of car keys
- Extra pair of eyeglasses
- Matches in waterproof container



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another city, your children will take comfort in knowing that they have someplace to go, Dr. Buras says.

Minimizing the Anxiety

Even the most well-prepared family will feel stress when disaster is looming. To help children lessen their fears, encourage them to talk about what they're feeling. "Bring it up, and ask them what they think," Dr. Buras says. "Use play therapy. Put trucks and toys in a bathtub, fill it up, and show them what might happen."

Although it is important to watch media reports with your children, be careful to avoid overexposure to news of the impending disaster and make sure that images and language are age appropriate and not frightening. Most important, try to maintain your composure before, during, and after the ordeal. Children of all ages can easily pick up on their parents' fears and anxieties, and in a disaster, will look to you for help and clues on how to act. If you react with alarm, your child may become more scared. If you're overwhelmed with grief, your child's own sense of loss may be stronger. "The worst thing is for kids to see parents freaking out," Dr. Buras says. "Kids look to their parents as a steady influence in their lives."

Always be honest with your children. Answer their questions, so that they can understand what's going on. But base the amount of

information and level of detail on what's suitable for your child's age.

The Aftermath

Even when the event is over, it's important to watch your children for lingering signs of distress, which in extreme cases, can sometimes last for years. Some kids may suffer sleep disturbances, fatigue, and sadness. Younger kids may revert to bed-wetting and thumb-sucking. Older kids may use drugs or lose pleasure in activities they used to enjoy.

To help children cope, seek advice from a trained professional such as counselor, therapist or your pediatrician. Keep encouraging them to talk about how they're feeling. With younger kids, you might ask them to draw pictures or tell stories. Assure anxious children that you're there to take care of them — don't ask them to tough it out. Limit media exposure, which can traumatize kids of all ages, and find other ways to spend time together as a family. You might also involve your children in whatever you're doing. Giving children age-appropriate tasks can help them feel a part of the recovery process.

Finally, try to resume a normal routine as soon as possible, which for most kids, means going back to school, eating meals, and sleeping on a schedule. Getting back in a routine can be reassuring when the world seems to be in a state of chaos. For more information and resources, visit www.aap.org/disasters. •