

# Listen, Protect, and Connect

**PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID FOR  
CHILDREN, PARENTS, AND OTHER  
CAREGIVERS AFTER NATURAL DISASTERS**



**Helping you and your child  
in times of disaster.**

**As a parent or adult caregiver,  
you are in the best position to  
help children's recovery in the  
aftermath of a natural disaster.**



Just as you help children in other times of distress, illness, or upset, you are in an excellent position to help children when disaster strikes their lives.

You can help your child if you

# Listen, Protect, and Connect

the **three steps of “psychological first aid”** for your child after a disaster.

These steps can help your child bounce back from the disaster.

## Getting Started: Understanding the Effect of a Disaster on Your Child

**THINK ABOUT** your child's "**DIRECT EXPERIENCE**" with the disaster.

"Direct experience" means what happened to the child or their, **FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE** of the disaster. This means such things as seeing those injured or killed and/or feeling as if their lives (or those of loved ones) were in danger.

When a natural disaster strikes a community, everyone is touched by it. **After a disaster, changes can happen in a child's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.** These can happen in adults too.

### **Common Reactions in Children**

Children may worry about family members, friends, and even their pets. They may worry that the disaster might happen again. They frequently are concerned about being separated from caregivers. They may be worried and confused about their safety and yours.

**Other Behavior Changes you may see in your children include:**

- \* Decreased concentration and attention (in school or home).
- \* Changes in sleep.
- \* Changes in appetite.
- \* Frequent changes in mood.
- \* Sadness or depression.
- \* Increased irritability, increased anger outbursts, or temper tantrums.
- \* Changes in activities (they may not want to do the things they used to do).
- \* Withdrawal from family members, peers, or activities.
- \* Changes in school performance.

\*based on the PsySTART triage system

**Your children may ask you many questions or tell you about their disaster experience.** The same questions and stories may be repeated over and over again. They may also not completely understand what happened in the disaster and believe things that are not true about the event. **Sometimes, your children may feel that they are somehow responsible for what happened, because of something they did or failed to do, even if this is not logical.**

These changes can also be seen as they experience the recovery efforts after the disaster. Even though most people will experience these reactions, by following the steps outlined below, some of the stress from the disaster event can be reduced.

**THINK ABOUT and IDENTIFY “CONTRIBUTING FACTORS” (things that can make a difference) that can impact your child’s reaction to the disaster.**

“Contributing factors” include:

- loss of a family member or friend, including multiple losses
- seeing serious injury or dead bodies
- family members who remain missing after the disaster, including when their body has not been recovered, but presumed dead
- becoming hurt or sick because of the disaster
- being unable to evacuate quickly in the disaster
- trapped or delayed evacuation
- loss of home, school, and/or belongings
- loss of pets
- previous experiences with loss or disasters or other stressful times in their lives

**If your child has had any of these experiences,** you may wish to consider talking to a doctor, someone in your community, or a relief worker who has special training in helping children after a trauma like the disaster.

Remember, not all children will show their reactions or show their reactions in the same way. **Children may appear to be doing okay, but be struggling internally as they cope with the disaster and it’s aftermath.** They may even tell you that they are fine, even if they are upset or worried in order to not burden adults. The steps to help your children after the disaster can be helpful whether or not they are showing their reactions.

Now that you know about reactions that are common after a natural disaster and what kinds of things or risk factors can affect your child’s reactions, you’re ready to **LISTEN, PROTECT,** and **CONNECT!**

# 1. Listen, Protect, and Connect

The first important step to help your child after a disaster is to **listen and pay attention** to what your child says and how our child acts. Remember that your child may also show feelings in nonverbal ways like increased behavioral problems or withdrawal.

**Let your child know** you are willing to listen and talk about the disaster and to answer whatever questions that your child may have. **Answer questions simply and honestly**, remembering you may need to do this many times. **Children of different ages may understand the disaster in different ways**, so your answers will need to be in a way your child best understands. As a parent, you do this on a daily basis about other things in your lives; talking in ways they can understand will be no different when you talk about the disaster.

**Don't force talking.** Once you let your child know the disaster is fine to discuss, you may discover that your child will tell you about it in many ways, including drawing or playing about what happened.



You can use the following questions to talk with your child. Afterward, you may want to **write down how he or she answers**, so that you can remember and can share these with others that may be helping your child.

## 1. What do you think happened?

Listen to answers. Listen carefully for thoughts and ideas that are incorrect, especially if the misunderstanding may cause more worry or upset. When children do not understand what happened or they fill in missing pieces about the disaster, they may blame themselves for something or may be worried about things that are not true. If your child believes his or her actions (or lack of actions) may be responsible for the disaster, it is important to let your child know that no one is to blame for the natural disaster.

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## 2. What do you think about what is happening now? What do you think about the help disaster responders are giving?

This question will give you the chance to tell your child about what aid workers are doing to help after the disaster. Listen carefully for worries and concerns your child may have about what is happening in your community, especially about how it may affect your family and your child's school.

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### 3. What is you most upset or worried about?

Listen carefully. Sometimes this worry is tied to misunderstandings about the disaster. Talking about your child's worries may give you a chance to let your child know that you and others are doing everything possible to help your community since the disaster happened.

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### 4. Is there anything else you want to tell me or that you want to know more about?

If your child says "no", you can say, "if there is anything about the disaster that you want to talk about, you can tell me or ask at any time, and I will do my best to answer you." This lets your child know that you are always willing to talk.

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### 5. Other items to note:

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**You can also "Listen" with your eyes.** Keep a watch for any of the common reactions listed below that your child may show and that may be related to the disaster. With your support and guidance, these generally will fade with time. For those that have experienced loss of loved ones or if they experienced other of the contributing or risk factors and/or if reactions are interfering with your child's day-to-day life, contacting an aid worker, teacher, or other trusted person in your community for added help is important as you work to help your child. You can write down changes that worry you about your child so you can remember them when you talk to a helping adult.

\* Changes in behavior and/or mood:

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\* Changes in sleep and/or eating:

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\* Changes with family and/or friends:

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\* Changes at school (once school begins after the disaster):

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\* Other changes you see:

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## Listen, 2. Protect, and Connect



You can **help make your child feel better** by doing some or all of the following:

- \* **Strive to keep your child safe.** After a disaster, keeping your child physically safe is important. Aid workers and community leaders will have information about the best ways to do this. Keeping your child safe also means being sure there is enough food and water to keep your child healthy during this stressful time. Check with aid workers to find these resources.
- \* **Be a little extra patient; pay a little extra attention to your child.** Your child may not want to be far from your side. Sometimes this may be stressful for you, because you have many things you need to do for yourself and for your family after the disaster. Be patient with your child. You can let your child know when you can have some quiet time together. This may be after a meal or before bed. Knowing you will find some time each day just for your family can help your child feel more safe and protected.
- \* **Talk about what is being done to help your community after the disaster.** Let your child know what others are doing to protect you and your family after this disaster--what is being done by your community leaders, other adults, and aid workers who have come to help. Explain to your child that your actions combined with the actions of others are being done to protect everyone, keep everyone safe, and help everyone do better after this disaster.
- \* **Keep some of the usual daily routines.** Children often feel more safe, secure, and protected when routine and day-to-day activities are back in place. Whenever possible, help your child get back to some of the same routines that were present before the disaster, even if these take place in a different setting. For example, you may be living in a different place after the disaster, but you can still have meals with your child, talk, or tell a story before bedtime like you did before the disaster. As much as possible, maintain the important rules your family had in place before the disaster; however, your children may need gentle reminders about what you expect after the disaster.
- \* **Pay attention to what your children are seeing and hearing after the disaster.** You can protect your child from further impacts of the disaster by being mindful of what is around you. Consider what your child is seeing and hearing. You can protect your child from feeling like the disaster is happening again when you pay attention to what is going on around you. If you are surrounded by what happened, remember to *listen* to what they are thinking and feeling. If you have access to television/Internet/or other sources of news, it is important that your child not spend a lot of time (if any) looking at how the disaster is being reported. Remember, what is not upsetting or troubling to you, may confuse or upset your child. Limiting further exposure to sights and sounds may be very helpful in the child's recovery.

- \* **Take a break from the disaster.** You can protect your child by encouraging your child to take a break from the disaster by playing with friends, reading, or playing a game. Even after a disaster when there is much to do such as cleaning up, playing is an important activity for children as it may protect them from being overwhelmed by the disaster. It may help you as well to take a break with your child— allow yourself to enjoy being with your family.
- \* **Be a positive role model for your child.** Children will often look to the important adults in their lives to decide how to act and what to think. Your child did this before the disaster and will do it after it. Your child will listen to what you are saying and how you are acting. By showing your child that you sometimes take a break, your child may be more likely to do so too. By taking time to take care of yourself, your child will learn this is important. Children listen to what adults say, so it is important to pay attention to what you say to other adults when your child is around you. Your child may hear adults talking, but not completely understand what is being said; this can lead to worry and confusion. By being a positive role model, you can show your child that even when something as horrible as the disaster happens, you can cope. This will help protect your child from feeling overwhelmed by the what happened in and after the disaster.
- \* **Talk to your child about common reactions after a disaster.** You now know about different reactions your child may have. You can help your children feel better and help protect them from extra worry and fears by sharing this information with your child, reassuring him or her that the thoughts and feelings may be just like those that other children may be having.
- \* **Include your child in developing a plan for safety in the future.** As your child may be worried about another disaster, this is a good time to talk about safety plans for the future. In your safety plan, be sure to decide what to do if you are ever separated after a disaster (Where would you meet? Who is a trusted adult your child can turn to for help?).

**There are many ways to help protect your child after the disaster. To help you remember what you can do to make your child feel better, write down a few of your ideas.**

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## Listen, Protect, and 3. Connect

**Reaching out to family, friends, and people in your community will help your child after a disaster.** These connections will build strength and help both you and your child. Consider ways to make some or all of the following connections:



- \* **Find people who can offer support to you and your child.** There were people that were important and helpful in your life before the disaster. Connecting with them after the disaster can help in your child's recovery. This can mean connecting with friends, schoolmates, or other supportive people in your lives before the event occurred.
- \* **Learn about new resources in your community after the disaster.** There are often new supports and resources that come to communities after a disaster. Learn about what may be available to you. You may find out this information from community leaders, teachers, or aid workers. These new connections can be another way to help you and your child after the disaster.
- \* **Keep communication open with others involved in your child's life.** There are many adults that are important in your child's life. Staying connected with them and letting them know what your child is thinking, feeling, and how your child is acting can increase the connection these important adults have with your child. They can also let you know what they may be seeing as your child copes with the disaster. Good communication is a connection that can improve your child's outcome after the disaster.
- \* **Encourage activities that your child enjoyed before the disaster.** Children have many activities that keep them connected to others, including family members, friends, and schoolmates. After a disaster, your child may not want to do these activities anymore. When it is safe, encourage your child to get back to some or all of them. Being involved in activities helps your child connect again with others, and through these connections, your child can cope better with the disaster.
- \* **Build on your child's strengths.** Although your child may never have experienced a disaster before, your child has faced other challenges. Help your child "connect" with the positive actions and ways he or she coped in the past. Think about ways your community has overcome adversity in the past. You may know stories of your family or others who met and overcame great challenges. Share these with your child as it connects your family with the past. Your child can learn that even when under tremendous stress, others were able to recover and move ahead. Sometimes, you may need some extra help to teach your child how to cope after a disaster. Connect with community leaders, teachers, or aid workers for suggestions. Together, you will be able to meet the needs of your child.
- \* **Set small goals with your child.** After a disaster, your child may feel overwhelmed and believe there is nothing to be done to move beyond what has happened. With your child, identify very small steps or goals your child can achieve. By taking one at a time, your child will see that moving forward is possible. By letting your child know you recognize when these small goals are met, your child can connect with the idea that life can get better again and that the actions you and your child take can make it possible.

- \* **Find ways for your child to help others.** When we help others, we also help ourselves. Find ways for your child to feel helpful to those around you (your family, other families or other children, your community, or even the aid workers). Older children may help by spending a bit of time watching younger children. However, remember the older children are still children, and may need some play time also. Younger children may draw pictures to give to aid workers. All may help, as appropriate, with clean-up activities for your family and for those around you.
- \* **Remind your child that disasters are rare.** When a disaster strikes, it is often hard for children to remember that these events are very rare. By giving your child a bit of extra patience, remind them of the fact that what happened is unusual. Help your child connect with times he or she has felt safe in the past as these memories can help your child see a future that includes feeling safe again.

**Learn** about what types of **disaster services** might be available to **support your child**. This can be various kinds of school, recreational or health-related programs.

**List some here:**

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**List ideas** that you can do **to help your child and family connect with others** after the disaster. This list can be useful when you or your child are feeling overwhelmed by what has happened.

**List some here:**

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## Keep in Mind

As you help your child after a disaster, your **“Listen, Protect, and Connect”** efforts may be more successful — and you may be less stressed — if you keep in mind:

- \* It is good to be aware of your thoughts, feelings, and reactions about the event, which can be seen and can affect your child.
- \* How you cope and behave after an event will influence how your child copes and behaves.
- \* Your child will look to you as a role model for handling the disaster and what happens next.
- \* It is important to keep up good physical and mental health even during stressful times; when you take care of yourself, your child will be more likely to follow your example.
- \* Each family member may have a different way or time period needed to cope with the disaster.
- \* Children of different ages understand and react differently to disasters.
- \* Even children of the same age understand and react quite differently and that is expectable.
- \* Your child’s behavior may get worse before it gets better.
- \* Your child may be more demanding of your time and attention.
- \* Extra patience with your child is needed after a disaster.
- \* For many children, any different behaviors that are the result of the disaster will get better over time.

## **It is okay to ask for help**

After any disaster, all of us need some extra help. Reach out to others, including family, friends, teachers, community leaders, and aid workers for help. When your child sees that adults ask for help from each other, your child may be more willing to ask for help from you.

It may be important to ask for extra help:

- ◆ If you have identified any of the “contributing factors” for your child or yourself that you have learned that can increase problems after a disaster.
- ◆ When your child’s behavior is not getting better over time.
- ◆ When you or other family members have feelings of being overwhelmed or overly stressed that don’t go away over time.
- ◆ When you are not sure about how to handle a situation with your child.
- ◆ When you feel unsure, not able, or unfamiliar with how to guide and help your child after the disaster.

**Remember that you and your child can**

**EXPECT RECOVERY.**

**Practicing the steps of  
Listen, Protect, and Connect  
can help.**

## For More Information

**For more information on  
Listen, Protect, and Connect:  
Psychological First Aid for Children and Parents,**  
contact Merritt Schreiber, PhD at the  
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Or

**The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement**

Phone: 513-803-2222

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