

- In the wake of disaster, and during continued media coverage, maintain basic, predictable routines as much as possible. Nutrition, sleep and play routines, along with old-fashioned TLC, like reading stories together, help children feel more calm and safe.
- Limit children's exposure to news media covering the crisis. A child's fertile imagination spins dramatic visuals for events described. To complicate things for young children, seeing is believing. They struggle separating fact from fantasy. With constant replays of news coverage, children can form terrifying misconceptions.
- Once settled away from a disaster site, plan soothing activities to calm and distract children's attention from disaster coverage. Turn off the television and radio when young kids are present. To help children maintain perspective, limit constant re-hashing of a crisis during family conversations.
- Provide ways for children to safely express their feelings. For young children this may include drawing, finger-painting, singing, kneading play dough, blowing bubbles, puppetry, or dress-up play. Older children are often helped through poetry, story or letter writing, dictating or keeping a journal diary, or talking with friends if communication tools are available.
- Children benefit from concrete ways of helping victims. Helping others builds children's self-confidence and potential for compassion. It also combats feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Contact your local emergency response agency, such as Red Cross or Salvation Army, to see how your family can help others. For instance, children not affected by the disaster can share extra clothing or toys with evacuated children.

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- If you become overwhelmed by a crisis, find others to whom you can privately and confidentially express anxiety. By getting emotional help for yourself, you'll be better able to support your children.

Symptoms of Children Over-Stressed by Crisis

During times of unrelenting stress, children's behavior or attitude may change. If such signs don't reduce over time, or increase, consider taking children for counseling to help them make sense of reality. Symptoms calling for skilled help include: changes in sleep patterns, appetite, or energy level; bedwetting; regression in toilet training; regression to thumb sucking; uncharacteristic separation problems from parents; excessive whining and irritability; long-term poor concentration; unusual, persistent aggression; and apathy, isolation, and depression.

Books for Parents and Others Helping Children

Bad Stuff in the News: A guide to handling the headlines by Marc Gellman and Thomas Hartman (New York: Sea Star Books, 2002)

A Reassuring Children's Book

The Place I Know: Poems of Comfort selected by Georgia Heard (Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 2002)

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.