



Helping Children when Catastrophe Strikes

Jim Greenman

This week we have all been witness to the incredible power of nature brought on by Hurricane Katrina in the southern United States. Massive flooding, homes washed away, devastation for miles, limitless grief and shock. What do our children think and feel when they see the pictures in the news, overhear stories of destruction and despair, and notice our anxiety about what may happen next? What do we tell children about the natural world that they live in? How do we respond to their questions about the power and unpredictability of nature and their safety, the safety of others and the horror that strikes the victims they see in the media.

Extraordinary events like the hurricane not only test us as citizens and human beings sharing a planet, they also test us as parents, both as guardians of our children trying to keep them emotionally safe, and as our children's teachers trying to raise young children who become enlightened and empathetic adults. Children learn from what we say and don't say about the world and their place in it and from our actions.

For young children in times of unease, the strength of our calm presence and simple reassurances help to make the world a safe and manageable place. Because adults determine the emotional climate for young children, adult reactions to the hurricane will impact on children's reactions. Many of us, from babies unable to put feelings into thoughts to adults who have lived through years of world events, have similar questions when facing catastrophic events: Could that happen to me? Will I always be okay? Will you be okay? Will everyone I love be okay? Will the world be okay? Some children may see the images on television and become anxious, particularly those who live in coastal areas, have experience with hurricanes or floods or earthquakes, or tend to be very empathetic or sensitive to potential threats.

As children get older and their understanding of the world outside their home grows, they not only need us to be calm and reassuring, they need our knowledge and our ideas about the larger issues: life is unpredictable; natural and manmade disasters regularly create catastrophe and tragedy. Why? Innocent people die and some people are more vulnerable than others. Why? How can I help people who are hurting?

Children Need Our Wisdom

Children grow into the kind of people they will become at least in part by how we guide them through their questions, concerns and fears, and whether we use the teachable moments thrust upon us to guide and teach the children we care for. Our children need our worldview articulated in language they are developmentally able to understand. They will observe not just what we say, but what we do. How and what we teach our children depends on who we are: our civic nature and sense of compassion; our spirituality and feelings; and our willingness to take the time to learn about events, respond with compassion and generosity, and pass that on to our children.

The most important thing we can do for our children is to be there, listen, be our most thoughtful selves, and respond to their emotional and educational needs. The family can be a safe haven where children can express their ideas and fears, and be assured that parents will do their best to protect them. It can be a place to teach them about the world that they will inherit.

Our Responsibility to Children

Some preschool and school-age children will react to the hurricane tragedy with anxiety and questions, others with little anxiety but lots of interest. Other children will experience little anxiety and little interest.

Our responsibility as parents and teachers is to:

- Recognize that every child is an individual
- Reassure children of their own safety and security
- Help children play and talk through their feelings and understandings
- Limit their exposure to horrific images by reducing exposure to the media.
- Help children participate in global events in ways that are meaningful to them

Disaster and Children's Play

It is natural for children to reflect events around them. If disasters are dominating the talk of adults and the news, you may find young children express their concern or interest in their questions, play, or art.

Answering Children's Questions about the Hurricane and Other Disasters

If your children are interested in discussing the tragic disaster, be prepared with the facts of the situation and the appropriate language. The key points for talking to any child are to:

- Tailor your response to the individual child - keep in mind the child's age, personality and level of interest.
- Ask what the child knows and is thinking about; answer their questions without over-explaining or providing more details than necessary.
- Help them understand that the natural world is a source of both life and struggle: water; wind; fire; and the earth beneath us are a part of our lives. If older children are interested in how hurricanes, earthquakes and tsunamis happen, help them find out more about these natural processes.
- Help older children understand about the world that they are seeing and use it as an opportunity to discuss issues of culture, poverty, global responsibility, and geography.
- While parents should use children's questions and statements as "teachable moments" to impart their moral and religious thinking and values about basic issues, teachers should help children cope with any anxiety, confusion or interest **without** expressing their own religious or political views.
- In response to question of "could it happen here?" obviously your response will be different depending on where you live and the age of the child. Younger children can be reassured simply that we don't think that anything like what they may have seen will happen, and we will keep them safe. Older children in coastal areas may want to know a little more about how their situation is different than the conditions in the Gulf region and why the possibility of devastation is unlikely.

Helping the Victims

Children learn empathy and compassion by taking actions that help others and watching parents who model kindness, generosity, and compassion.

There has been a huge outpouring of support for the victims. There are a large number of relief organizations mobilizing support for the victims and many communities have local efforts contributing to relief in some fashion as a family helps children develop a feeling of connectedness to the world and a sense of power to help others. Bright Horizons is establishing our own relief fund to support employees and families from within the Bright Horizons family who have been directly impacted by Hurricane Katrina. Children may also get involved in a variety of relief efforts that may be planned in their local community.