



REPUBLIC OF TURKEY  
MINISTRY OF FAMILY AND SOCIAL SERVICES

# CHILDREN'S REACTIONS AFTER DISASTERS AND EMERGENCIES and SUGGESTIONS FOR FAMILIES



In cooperation with the Ministry of Family and Social Services, and UNICEF

In accordance with their age group, your child can have the following reactions. These reactions are usual reactions of the body and mind to an unusual situation. Any child who experiences similar disasters or emergencies might react similarly.

## Children's Reactions to Difficult Events such as Disasters, and Suggestions for Coping

### Between the ages of 0 and 2 (Infancy Period)

- Crying, irritability, inability to calm down and being tense,
- Clinging to the mother, father or relatives and not letting go,
- Wanting to be held more often, not tolerating being alone,
- Not being able to fall asleep, waking up frequently with sudden twitches or excessive sleeping,
- Refusing to eat or constant need to eat, suck or bite.



### To make it easier to cope with these reactions;



- ✔ Strive to ensure the child feels safe and their basic needs are not neglected.
- ✔ Try to maintain the baby's daily routine such as usual sleep and nutrition.
- ✔ Do things that you know will help calm the child. You can give a favorite toy or belonging, sing a lullaby, and play finger games.
- ✔ If the caregiver of the baby is to change; make sure that this person is someone the baby is used to.

## Between the ages of 3 and 5 (Preschool Period)

- Being overly afraid of the uncertainties and problems in life, feeling desperate,
- Asking repetitive questions about the events, impersonating the events in their games,
- Thinking that it is their own fault,
- Crying, whining, introversion,
- Not being able to be alone, clinging to their parents and not letting go,
- Being excessively active, acting in ways that threaten their own safety (Playing with pointed objects, walking outside alone, playing dangerous games...)
- Unwillingness to go to bed and sleep, having nightmares, screaming, bedwetting,
- Displaying infantile behaviors/ developmental regression such as finger sucking, wetting themselves, asking to be fed with a bottle or held,
- Weight gain or loss due to loss of appetite or increased appetite.



### To make it easier to cope with these reactions:

- ✔ Let your child ask questions about disasters/emergencies/ losses and make sure to answer them calmly.
- ✔ Give appropriate answers for the age of the child using clear and similar sentences.
- ✔ For children with severe anxiety, giving detailed responses every time might aggravate their symptoms. Support your children to answer their own questions, saying "Let's remember the things we talked about before".
- ✔ Do activities with your child by creating appropriate hours and settings. Set time aside for activities such as painting, reading fairy tales, sightseeing, playing with toys, and handicrafts, singing and dancing.
- ✔ Keep in touch with special education teachers for children with special needs and make sure that they return to their education in a short time. If they are unable to attend school, learn the weekly schedule to implement it at home and help them stick to it.



## Between the ages of 6 and 12 (Primary Education)

- Excessive fear of signs that remind them of the incident (shaking of the bed, noise at night...)
- Crying, whining,
- Quick temper, aggressiveness, harmful behaviors that they have never done before,
- Idiopathic physical problems (such as abdominal pain, and various pains in the body),
- Being afraid of loneliness, constantly staying with relatives, clinging to parents,
- Not being able to concentrate, being more active, not being able to stay still,
- Nail biting, wetting themselves,
- Withdrawal, avoiding talking about the incident,
- Not wanting to or refusing to go to school,
- Changes in sleep and nutrition patterns (loss of appetite, not wanting to sleep, not being able to fall asleep/excessive sleeping).

### To make it easier to cope with these reactions:

- ✔ Try to maintain your child's daily routine such as meals, games, lessons and sleep hours.
- ✔ Support your child in communicating with his/her teacher and friends.
- ✔ Plan settings and meetings where they can come together with friends. Learn child-friendly locations for activities and have him/her participate.
- ✔ Try to understand your child's thoughts and feelings well. To do this, first, share your own feelings and thoughts with your child: "You know, I'm also worried, I'm also scared."
- ✔ In your conversations, support your children in expressing themselves by using words that can help them express themselves, such as "Sometimes I feel my heart throbbing, have difficulty breathing, have shaky hands or get nauseous when I feel anxious... Do you experience similar signs?"
- ✔ Sometimes you can support them to express themselves through stories, tales, and/or movies.
- ✔ Make it clear that you are listening to them carefully. When they ask questions that you do not know, do tell them that you do not know about it; but you can mention that you can learn and tell, or you can also say that you both can research and learn together.



## Between the ages of 13 and 18 (Adolescence Period)

- Intense emotions such as anger, rebellion, sadness, and guilt,
- Starting to act more mature after the disaster or emergency,
- Acting in ways that will result in self-harm,
- Having idiopathic physical complaints,
- Inclination towards crime, using harmful/addictive substances,
- Withdrawal, fearing something bad will happen anytime,
- Loss of motivation and energy, apathy,
- Avoiding subjects and settings that remind them of the incident,
- Changes in sleep and nutrition (loss of appetite, not wanting to sleep, not being able to fall asleep/ excessive sleeping).

### To make it easier to cope with these reactions:

- ✔ When they want to be alone, try to create an environment where they can be alone even for a short amount of time.
- ✔ Make them understand that you value their thoughts as an individual. Try to have conversations without giving advice and suggestions. Make sure that they return to school and social life as soon as possible.
- ✔ Encourage them to share their experiences with friends they trust.
- ✔ Direct your children to social projects, charity activities and social activities (sports, chess, drama...) for them to regain their self-confidence.
- ✔ Keep your eyes open for your children's use of harmful/ addictive substances and their tendency towards crime. Reassure them that they can talk to you about these matters.
- ✔ Allow your child to help you with daily chores that are appropriate for their age such as cooking, cleaning, and repairing. Let them give their opinion on subjects that requires a decision to be made but do not give them heavy responsibilities such as the role of a mother or father.



## When providing support to children with special needs during disasters;

- First, try to understand the child's unique needs and support him/her in meeting them. Realize that the child with special needs will want to share the same needs with other children, except for their special needs.
- Support them to make sense of the incident. Explain the incident once again using different methods such as auditory and visual materials.
- Meet their basic needs and ensure their safety.
- Support the child's unique ways that s/he uses to express himself/herself (drawing, painting, talking, etc.)
- As an adult, share your own feelings and thoughts with the child. Support the child in expressing his/her own feelings and thoughts as well.



## Pay attention to the following aspects while supporting children and adolescents in disasters and emergencies!

- **In disasters and emergencies, children get affected by your reactions.** If you believe that you are too weak, endangered and desperate, and believe that the incident is too much to cope with; the child will likely see things the same way and get affected by your reactions. Share your feelings with your children, but make sure that your intense fears and worries do not affect them.
- **Disasters and emergencies can lead to the loss of the physical, social and emotional environment that the child is accustomed to.** For instance; events such as losing a parent, moving, physical illness, and not being able to go to school might cause the child to get more affected. Take action to help them get used to a routine as soon as possible.
- **Children get affected by disasters and emergencies at different levels.** Children's individual characteristics, age, developmental level, gender, previous traumatic events and social environment affect their reaction to disasters. The reactions of children and adolescents to the same events may differ. But families must make the utmost effort to support their children, no matter how old they are and how they react.
- The child's previous experience of different traumatic events (events leaving scars, that are painful and far beyond the problems of daily life) might make it difficult to cope with problems. If that is the case, observe your child more closely and get support from mental health professionals.

## How Can You Support Your Child?

- **Help your child understand what happened.**

First, ask your child questions about the incident and how they perceive it; then give simple, explanatory and reassuring answers. Repeat your answer in similar sentences calmly and consistently. Don't be in a rush to give answers that you don't know or that make you feel bad. Be patient when they ask the same questions and topics over and over and do not force them to talk when they don't ask anything. Especially young children might think that disasters happen because of them. You might need to repeat often that the incident they experienced and/or death is not the result of their actions.



- **When communicating with your child, make sure to be in a calm and quiet environment where you will not be disturbed.** In an environment where both of you can easily make eye contact, initiate communication in a way that directs your full attention to your child. Keep communicating, making sure that your voice is calm, reassuring, and compassionate. When you communicate, spend time or play games; make sure that you are not in a hurry, or too tired, hungry, sleepless or angry. When you realize that you are tired or reach a point where you are overwhelmed; you can politely say, "Let's take a break to eat something, play some games or rest a little; then we can continue again."

- **When communicating with your child, use skills appropriate for his/her age.**

For example, regarding children attending preschool, you can do activities such as painting, music, playing with dough, paper cutting/pasting, and watching informative cartoons together. Use short, clear and simple answers.



For older children, you need to use your communication skills more often, but make sure to listen first. Help them rebuild their social relationships and strengthen their interests.

- **Support them in naming their fears; and expressing their concerns with games, tales and pictures.**

Support them to make sense of their feelings and experiences by telling them how you felt and what you experienced after the event. For example, you might say that your heart was beating very fast during the earthquake, that you were afraid and you couldn't think of anything for a moment. To make them understand the changes in their bodies; you can make them feel the rapid heartbeat by placing their hand on their heart or putting their hand on their stomach to make them feel the swelling of the abdomen when they take a deep breath.



To help them regulate their heartbeat and breathing, you can have competitions of blowing ping pong balls, making bubbles from foam, or trying to blow feathers away that are tied to a string.

When children are distracted and inactive more than ever, you can energize them with games. For instance, when they are very distracted, you can have competitions using questions that will activate their five senses. You can bring an apple close to their nose and ask “Which fruit do you think this is?” You can then make them hold it with their hands and ask them to recognize it. You can play guessing games about which fruit or dried nut s/he threw into his/her mouth with his/her eyes closed.



Repeating what your child says when they seem uneasy, using phrases such as “You are afraid”, and “You still miss your lost toy” for example, might be useful.

If they lost a beloved toy or something similar, and if they are mourning for it, allow them; and try to replace it if possible.



- **Hug more often, and spend more time together.**

Create an opportunity for them to understand that you are with them and that they are safe. Do not be late to pick them up from school or get home from work, and avoid sudden changes without notice.



- **Make plans for the future, dream, and talk about hopeful matters that will make you happy.**

For example, do research on what they want to become when they grow up. Give them hope that schools will reopen and that they can make new friends. Plan activities that you can do or attend, and plan things to do and places to go to for the weekend or the summer.

- **Make sure that everyone returns to their usual roles and responsibilities in a short time.**

It will be an example for them if the adults of the house start going to work, fulfilling their responsibilities at home or in the living area regularly, and pay attention to their personal hygiene and routine. Support your child to similarly organize their relationships, fulfill their responsibilities, and pay attention to their health.



- **When your child has nightmares, hug him/her and ask him/her to tell you about what s/he saw without forcing him/her.** Calmly listen to them until the end, and help them fall asleep again. In accordance with their age, you can sing lullabies, read a short story, talk about an interesting topic or make a joyful plan for the next day. It will be good for them to know that you also have nightmares from time to time and that it is an annoying situation, but it is something that other people also experience.

- **Keep your child away from images, news programs and conversations about the disaster or the emergency that are not suitable for their age.** Make sure that children do not see images of rubble etc. as much as possible. It is especially important for children who can actively use social media to know that they should stay away from misleading, inaccurate and frightening information on social media during this period. During this time, make sure that you and your child obtain information from correct and reliable sources.

- **Provide opportunities for hyperactive children to play in safe environments where they will not harm themselves or others.**

Find out the locations of the closest children's activity areas, make sure that these areas are safe and make sure that your child participates. Direct their energies to positive activities and reinforce their self-confidence. Remember that children might be more aggressive and angry during this period, notice these behaviors and do not overreact to them. Motivate them by noticing their positive behaviors and rewarding/ appreciating them 🌱



- **When such disasters happen, you might get more prone to taking some precautions to prepare for disasters.** Making various preparations might help overcome the problems that will arise later on. That is why you should practice what to do during a possible disaster or emergency with your child (such as making earthquake plans, memorizing the home address, phone numbers to call in case of fire and rules of conduct). For this, you can use puppets, watch informative videos, and try methods such as asking questions with riddles.
- If possible; chat with them before they go to sleep. You can tell them tales and stories to make them fall asleep more comfortably. Drinking warm milk and staying away from electronic devices can improve sleep quality. In addition, painting and playing calm games with one or two toys during the hours right before going to sleep will also help them.

## When Should You Consult A Mental Health Professional?

- If the said reactions continue without a change and increase for a few months after the disaster/ emergency and/ or if they are at a level that will affect the child's social, mental and physical development
- If the child is showing many of the usual reactions mentioned above all together and severely,
- If the changes in the child's behavior are observed in many different situations or environments (for instance, both at home and with friends at school),
- If they try to harm themselves or express that they will,

**A MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL SHOULD BE CONSULTED IMMEDIATELY.**



### **Remember!**

You can seek help from psychosocial support staff deployed in times of disaster and emergency through provincial directorates of the Ministry of Family and Social Services.



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CASE of NEED:**

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