

Crisis Counseling Guide

School Age (5-11 years)

If an emergency/disaster occurs, it is important to recognize normal reactions of children to the event. Reactions of children are generally age related and specific. This section provides an overview of normal reactions within determined age groups and helpful hints for enabling children to cope with the disaster-precipitated stress. Also included is a list of symptoms, which may warrant referral to a mental health professional.

Disaster may strike quickly and without warning. These events can be frightening for adults, but they are traumatic for children. During a disaster, your family may have to leave their home and daily routine. Children may become anxious, confused or frightened. As a parent, you will need to cope with the disaster in a way that will help children avoid developing a permanent sense of loss. It is important to give children guidance that will help them reduce their fears. Ultimately, you should decide what's best for your children, but consider using these suggestions as guidelines.

- Children experience a variety of reactions and feelings in response to a disaster and need special attention to meet their needs.
- The two most common indicators of distress in children are changes in their behavior and behavior regression. A change in behavior is any behavior the child exhibits that is not typical for them. For example, an outgoing child may become very shy and withdrawn. Regression is where past behaviors occur, such as thumb sucking or baby-talk.
- Children may experience a variety of reactions and feelings based on their age. Helpful hints for coping with these reactions are listed.

Reactions to disasters may appear immediately after the disaster or after several days or weeks. Most of the time the symptoms will pass after the child readjusts. When symptoms do continue, most likely a more serious emotional problem has developed. In this case, referring the child to a mental health worker who is experienced in working with children and trauma would be necessary.

The school-age child is able to understand permanent changes or losses. Fears and anxieties predominate in this age group. Imaginary fears that seem unrelated to the disaster may appear. Some children, however, become preoccupied with the details of the disaster and want to talk about it continuously. This can get in the way of other activities.

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Typical responses:

- Thumb sucking
- Irritability
- Whining
- Clinging
- Aggressive behavior at home or school
- Competition with younger siblings for parental attention
- Night terrors, nightmares, fear of darkness
- School avoidance
- Withdrawal from peers
- Loss of interest and poor concentration in school
- Regressive behavior
- Headaches or other physical complaints
- Depression
- Fears about weather; safety

Helpful Hints:

- Patience and tolerance
- Play sessions with adults and peers
- Discussions with adults and peers
- Relaxed expectations at school or at home (temporarily)
- Opportunities for structures but not demanding chores and responsibilities at home
- Rehearsal of safety measures to be taken in future disasters