

## **Crisis Counseling Guide**

### **Preschool (1-5 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 For example, an outgoing child may become very shy and withdrawn.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.

When faced with an overwhelming situation, such as a disaster, children in this age range often feel helpless and experience an intense fear and insecurity because of their inability to protect themselves. Many children lack the verbal skills and conceptual skills needed to cope effectively with sudden stress. The reactions of their parents and families often strongly affect them. Abandonment is of great concern for preschoolers, and children who have lost a toy, pet, or a family member will need extra comfort.

## Preschool (1-5 years)

### Typical Reactions:

- Bed-wetting
- Fear of the darkness or animals
- Clinging to parents
- Night terrors
- Loss of bladder or bowel control, constipation
- Speech difficulties (e.g., stammering)
- Loss or increase of appetite
- Cries or screams for help
- Immobility, with trembling and frightening expressions
- Running either toward an adult or in aimless motion
- Fear of being left alone; of strangers
- Confusion

### Helpful Hints:

- Encourage expression through play reenactment
- Provide verbal reassurance and physical comforting
- Give frequent attention
- Encourage expression regarding loss of pets or toys
- Provide comforting bedtime routines
- Allow to sleep in same room with parents until the child can return to their own room without the post-disaster fear