

Coping with Children's Reactions to Earthquakes and Other Disasters

The Earthquake

For many children in the area, the Los Angeles Earthquake was one of the most dramatic and unpredictable events that had ever occurred to them. They were awakened at 4.31am by a frightening shaking of the earth, their beds rocking – sometimes moving across the room, furniture tumbling over walls rattling, toys falling off the shelves. In many instances they saw their parents upset and frightened and perhaps clutching them.

An earthquake is a 'natural disaster'. Other such events are fire, flood or storm. These are traumatic and frightening events that may occur in some children's lives. These events may result in families having to leave their homes and familiar surroundings. A child does not usually understand such events and feels confused, anxious and frightened.

In concern for the physical safety of the child and family, attention to and awareness of emotional consequences are frequently neglected. We cannot control these events. However, they need not result in permanent emotional damage to the child.

This booklet has been prepared to help parents deal with children's fears and anxieties following a disaster. When we use the word 'parents' here and throughout this pamphlet, we also include teachers and other adults having responsibility for a child.

Understanding the Child

Most children's lives consist of certain routines and patterns. For most school age children, these patterns involve the presence of parents, awakening in the morning, preparing for school, meeting with the same teacher, the same children, playing with friends, sleeping in their own bed, essentially being able to depend on a set of predictable events. They expect dependability from the adults and certainly from the forces of nature. For pre-schoolers life is much the same. They spend the day within the familiarity of their world, be it at home, with baby sitters, or a pre-school. The family remains more or less consistent. When there is an interruption to the natural flow of life, the child experiences anxiety and fear. How the adults help the child resolve these 'problem times' may have a lasting effect on the child.

Fear and Anxiety

Fear is a normal reaction to any danger which threatens life or well-being.

After a disaster children may be afraid of:

- **recurrence, injury or death**
- **separation from their family**
- **being left alone.**

Parents should recognise, however, that there are fears that stem from within the child, their imagination or fantasies, as well as those fears that are stimulated by a real event. Even after the event has passed, anxiety will sometimes remain. The child may not be able to describe their anxious feelings. Even though intensely afraid, they may be genuinely unable to give an explanation that makes rational sense.

The child, who is dependent on adults for love, care and security, fears most the loss of their parents and being left alone. In a disaster, even the child who is usually competent and unafraid may react with fear and considerable anxiety to an event which threatens the family. Adults also react emotionally with normal and natural fear as proof that the danger is real. A child having less experience in distinguishing real threat can be plagued by fears with no basis in reality. It is important to note that fantasised danger can be as real and threatening as 'real danger'.

A child experiences similar fear in other situations; for example, when parents separate, or divorce, when a child goes into hospital or when there is a death in the family.

Parents all recognise these more familiar fears and attempt to deal with them.

In natural disasters like fires, floods, storms or earthquakes, our first concern is with physical safety. This is as it should be.

However, parents tend to ignore the emotional needs of the child once they believe that nothing 'serious' has happened to members of the family.

When there has been no physical injury, parents may be surprised by the persistence of the child's fears. They may even feel resentment, particularly if the child's behaviour disrupts or interferes with the daily routine of the family.

One must recognise that a child who feels afraid, is afraid!

They are not trying to make more difficulties for themselves or their parents. The fear is uncomfortable to them. They would like nothing better than to be rid of their fears. If the child feels that parents are not understanding of their fears, they may feel ashamed, rejected, unloved and consequently, even more afraid.

A first step for parents is to understand the kinds of fear and anxiety a child experiences.

Parental understanding and helpful intervention can reduce the severity of fears and prevent more serious problems from developing. This is not a new role; parents routinely and effectively help children cope with fears encountered in day-to-day situations. However, when an unusual situation occurs, the ability of some parents to reassure their child, particularly when they themselves have been frightened, may be

impaired. The child feels even more fearful or anxious when suddenly they are unable to turn to the adults for reassurance.

Advice To Parents

What can parents do to help their child?

It is of great importance that the family remain together.

Being together with the family provides immediate reassurance for the child. Fears of being abandoned and unprotected are immediately alleviated. For example, immediately after a disaster parents should not leave the child in a 'safe place' while they go else where to inspect possible damage. They should not leave the child alone or with strangers while they go back to the damaged area. They should not leave the child to go shopping, but should take them along. With no opportunity to experience the fear of being left alone, the child is less likely to develop clinging behaviour.

The child needs reassurance by the parents' words as well as their actions!

“We are all together and nothing has happened to us”

“You don't have to worry, we will look after you”

Realistically, parents are also experiencing fear. However, they have the maturity to cope with the stresses upon them. A demonstration of strength should be apparent to the child who will feel more secure and reassured, however, it will not harm the child to let them know that you are also afraid. As a matter of fact, it is good to put their own feelings into words. This sharing will encourage them to talk about their own feelings and fears. Communication is most helpful in reducing the child's anxiety, and for that matter the adult's anxiety. The child may then express some fears which are not real and the parents will have an opportunity to explore these fears and reassure the child.

Listen to what the child tells you about their fears.

Listen when they tell you how they feel and what they think has happened.

Explain to the child, as well as you can, about the disaster (the fear-inducing event), about the known facts and, again, listen to them.

A child may express their fears in play and actions. If these are unrealistic, explain, and reassure them. You may have to repeat yourself many times. Don't stop explaining just because you have told them this once before.

Encourage the child to talk.

The silent child needs to be encouraged to talk. Difficulties in expressing themselves may be very frustrating to parents. It can be helpful to include other members of the family, neighbours, and their children in a talk about reactions to a disaster. Through the sharing of common experiences, fears are further reduced. It is essential that an

attempt should be made to provide an atmosphere of acceptance where a child will feel free to talk about their fears (be it at home or at school). Adults are often reluctant to encourage the child to talk about their fears and anxieties. They believe that this will only increase the fears and anxieties. Also, parents may feel helpless in reassuring the child, and may be afraid of actually harming the child by continued discussions.

Statements such as, "I know you are afraid" or "It is a scary feeling" are helpful and should be used. Being told it is natural and normal to be afraid is also reassuring.

A child's fears do not need to completely disrupt the family's activities.

It is apparent that there will be important concerns and things to do after a disaster-checking on the damage, cleaning up broken glass or fallen furniture. A child can and should be included in these activities. It is actually reassuring for a child if they are involved with the parent in these jobs. It is reassuring to see progress being made in bringing the house back to order and the routine of the household being resumed - meals prepared, dishes washed, beds made, playmates coming over. For the parents of a very young child, the task is more difficult. Such a child may need more physical care, more holding, and this makes it more difficult for parents to deal with other things that should be done. Unfortunately, there is no short cut. If the child's needs are not met, the problem will persist for a longer period.

Settling Down

When things begin to settle down, after the 'excitement' of the event has passed, some degree of lethargy may set in for both parents and children. It is very important that parents make a deliberate effort to avoid inactivity and to get back to routine.

Parents should indicate to the child that they are maintaining control; they should be understanding but firm and supportive, and make decisions for the child.

Parents question if they should make changes. Should they allow the child to sleep in their parents' bed, in their bedroom, or in another child's bed, or should the parent sleep in the child's room? It is necessary to become somewhat flexible. Bedtime may be delayed when the child is more anxious or wants to talk longer, but a limit should be set.

It is natural for a child to want to be close to their parents, and for the parents to want to have the child near to them.

Some children, who are more anxious than others, can be allowed to move into a room with another child, or sleep on a mattress in the parents' bedroom. For another child it may be sufficient for the parent, at bedtime, to spend a little more time in the child's bedroom reassuring him or her. All such arrangements, however, should return to normal after a few days. The parents and the child should agree together on the day for the return to their own bed (ideally not longer than three to four days hence) and the parent should abide by this decision. It is important for the child's independence that the parent be firm about their commitment.

Parents should also be aware of their own fears and their own uncertainty and of the effect these have upon the child.

If parents question – “Is it going to be safe there? Will they be frightened?” they contribute to the child’s continuing fear and inability to go back to their room. Reassurance with firmness is an effective approach. Getting angry at the child, punishing or shouting at them will rarely help. If the child comes out of their room, calmly return them to it and reassure them of your presence nearby. It may be helpful to leave a night-light on in the room, or in the hall, and leave the door ajar. Spending more time with the child during the day will make them feel more secure in the evening and at night.

Specific Fears

Following a traumatic event, such as natural disaster, irrational fears may develop in which some particular thing or situation evokes great anxiety to the point of panic, and is, therefore, strongly avoided. The child may become afraid of beds, their house, or darkness. A younger child may explain that imaginary monsters are threatening them. An older child may be afraid to go to school or even to leave their home. Reassurance to the younger child regarding monsters can be done by words, explanations, and pointing out to the child the differences between fantasy and reality.

With school phobias (refusal to go to school), it is essential to see to it that the child gets to school. In this instance, firmness is necessary and the child should know that you do expect them to attend school. The teacher or the school counsellor may be of help to you.

Regressive Behaviour

A child may sometimes revert to ‘childish’ behaviour which they have outgrown. Bed wetting, clinging to the parents, thumb sucking, and other problems may occur temporarily, and should not alarm parents. They are normally of short duration. These behaviours are only signs of the child’s anxiety, and parents’ acceptance will reassure the child and shorten the duration of such behaviours. When parents over-react to these behaviour patterns (become over-concerned, punish, or nag the child) these symptoms will persist much longer.

Children respond to praise, and parents should make a deliberate effort not to focus upon the child’s immature behaviour.

How Can the Parents Recognise When to Seek Professional Help?

Most parents are capable of helping their child overcome fears and anxiety. However, it is not a sign of failure if parents find that they are unable to help their child by themselves. A telephone call to a paediatrician, family doctor, the local mental health centre or clinic could be helpful. In some cases, advice can be given over the telephone. In other instances, parents will be counselled to bring their child for an interview. In cases of severe anxiety, early action will result in a return to normal.

Parents will recognise rather soon whether attempts to help their child have been successful.

If the sleeping problem continues for more than a few nights, if the clinging behaviour does not diminish, if the fears become worse, it is time to ask for professional advice.

Mental health professionals are specifically trained to help people in distress. They can help parents cope with and understand the unusual reactions of their child. By talking to the parents and child either individually or as a group, a child's fears can be overcome more easily.

Some parents are reluctant to consider seeking the help of a mental professional or a clinic. However, more and more people are becoming aware that there is no stigma attached to seeking help. It is a way to avoid severe problem.

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