



How to Talk to Your Children about Hurricane Harvey

In his role as executive director at Shield Bearer, Roy Wooten is frequently asked by parents or teachers how to help children when they or their community experiences a disaster.

“Every child reacts differently to a disaster and younger children handle the situation differently than older children. A child's personality and values also influence their reaction. Parents and teachers may notice children displaying a greater amount of energy following a disaster. Releasing energy is their body's natural response when safety is threatened. This can manifest as increased irritability, fidgeting, or the inability to focus on tasks at hand. There are some things parents and teachers can do though when disaster strikes,” states Wooten. Wooten specifically recommends the following:

Model calmness. Children will look to parents and other adults to cue their interpretation and reaction to the disaster. When children see the adults around them remaining calm, they will be more easily reassured of their own safety.

Help them talk. Parents frequently have difficulty discussing tragedy with their children. As with other times of loss or suffering, they do not know exactly what to say. Being available to listen to what children want to say will likely be more helpful than putting together a lecture. Encourage children to express how they feel when they are ready to discuss it.

Honestly answer questions. When children do not know the answers, they will ask questions. Parents who patiently attempt to answer tough questions will see their children move through the pain of the tragic event. If you don't know the answers, tell them so. Reassuring them of their present safety will help them learn to overcome fears that they might be struggling with.

Limit access to disaster news. Monitoring your children's access to news reports of the disaster will help reduce the possibility of nightmares. When a child watches news programs about a disaster, parents should be present to discuss the contents of reports.

Keep them busy. One of the most important things that a parent can do to help their children work through a disaster is to maintain the routine and structure of their children's lives. Keep appointments. Carry on with chores and responsibilities. Meet obligations.

Help them help. Every person touched by a disaster is motivated to help in some way. The negative emotions of fear, sorrow and anger can be channeled into acts of kindness. Having a child gather items for disaster victims, write a thank-you note to the first responders or draw a picture for someone intimately involved will help them feel they are making a difference. These actions can help them regain a sense of control over their situation.

Wooten adds, "Remember that each child is an individual. What helps one child might not help another. If there are significant changes in behavior, mood, or sleeping patterns, it is important to make a visit to a physician or professional counselor to assess what professional help might be needed. And above all else, let them know they are loved."

Roy Wooten has served as the executive director of Shield Bearer, 501c3 nonprofit organization with offices in West Houston, Tomball, Cy-Fair, Conroe, and Cypress Station, for over eleven years. Shield Bearer offers sliding scale, professional counseling services and programs for individuals of all ages, couples, and families. For a free, confidential phone assessment, call (281) 894-7222.

To learn how you can fight for the hearts of trauma survivors, including those affected by crime, abuse, war, human trafficking, natural disasters like Hurricane Harvey, and more, visit shieldbearer.org, call (281) 894-7222, or email volunteer@shieldbearer.org.