There is a bad man in a rock [Iraq] and I don’t know what rock he is in.— Young child explaining why he won’t play in the backyard

Even if your family has no exposure to mass media, your child hears about natural disasters such as the 2010 earthquake in Haiti and tries to make some sense about what is happening.

There are predictable ways your child reacts to disasters she sees on television and hears about in conversations. Your child wants to know:

- Will I be safe?
- Can it happen to me?
- How should I act? How will other people act?

Your child relies on the important adults in his world to protect him. You and your child care provider can work together to help your child feel safe and make sense of the world.

**Will I be safe?**

- Reassure your child that you and other caring adults, including your child care provider, are doing everything they can to make sure your home and child care program are safe places.

- Keep your child’s life predictable. Tell her where you are going and when you will come back.

- Find out what your child knows. Your child is learning what is real and what is not real. This is a hard job. Help your child discuss what facts he knows and help him separate fact from “not real.”

- Answer questions honestly, but do not offer more information than is needed.

- Expect to answer the same questions over and over again. Your child is sorting out information. Hearing the same answer again and again helps keep the world predictable.

**Can it happen to me?**

- Before a disaster happens, make natural disasters part of your regular reading selections, and encourage your child care provider to do so, too. Read your child storybooks involving children who encounter natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes, floods and tsunamis. Read science books that include information about how disasters can happen. Talk about where these events are likely to happen and how people prepare and react to them. Pull these familiar books out when a disaster happens and read and talk about them with your child.

- In child care programs where emergency plans are in place, staffs are able to respond quickly and appropriately to children who need attention and reassurance. Make sure your child care program has a disaster preparation plan in place, practices drills monthly and shares the plan with you and the other parents.

**How should I act? How will other people act?**

- Mr. Rogers advised parents help children cope with media coverage of disasters by helping children look for the helpers. Helpers are everywhere:
  - People are donating food and clothing

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Doctors and nurses are providing emergency medical care
The military is transporting food and medical supplies
Children are sorting canned goods
People are sending money

Encourage your child and your child care program to participate in constructive activities relative to the tragedy. Children can make sandwiches for local aid workers or draw pictures about acts of courage or bravery. Give your child the opportunity to come up with ideas about how she can help those in need.

Talk about the emotions different people involved in the disaster must feel:
✓ Scared about the future
✓ Sad because someone has died
✓ Hungry, thirsty, hurting
✓ Confused
✓ Relieved help is on the way
✓ Glad they can help

What you and your child care provider can do together to help your child feel safe and make sense of the world

Listen to your child. His words and behavior will tell you what he needs. Your child may become clingy and not want you to leave, become afraid of things that did not bother him before, cry more, have temper tantrums and have problems sleeping. Some children may daydream or have trouble concentrating on activities. Some children need to run around, others need to be held. Some may act out. Others may be just fine. Different children need different things.

Remember that the images on television are frightening, even to adults. Reduce or eliminate the presence of television in your child’s life at home and at your child care program.

Your child is comforted by normal routine. Maintain structure and stability at home and work with your child care provider to keep the daily schedule and engage in classroom activities that do not focus on the disaster.

Watch your child’s play activities and help interpret the world. When your child engages in pretend play, she is in charge. Then she does not feel so small, helpless and scared. Your child may play about the same thing over and over. Each time she plays about something, she understands it a little bit better.

Your child will feel stronger when he has some power over the fear. One activity that is often helpful is giving your child the opportunity to draw pictures and dictate stories about the disaster that he could share with you and the children in his child care group. It gives him the opportunity to express and work through some of his fear, anxiety and feelings of helplessness

When your child plays about disasters, her play can get wild. That is because she is scared. She needs an adult to stop her, help her calm down and redirect her play.

Give information to increase knowledge and add more details to the play activities.

Read books that talk about how people handle disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes, floods and tsunamis.

If your child seems preoccupied, consider getting professional assistance. If you need help, your child care provider may know about resources.

For More Information

Family Connections, http://www.fci.org/index.asp, continues the work of Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. It creates projects for children, families, and those who support them.

FEMA’s Resources for Parents and Teachers, http://www.fema.gov/kids/teacher.htm#resources, has information about disaster resources.

NACCRRA, Preparing for Disaster: The Parent View, http://www.naccrra.org/for_parents/coping/disaster, offers resources parents can use to work with child care provider to plan for and recover from any catastrophe that strikes.

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