



Bright Horizons®

What Happened to MY World

About This Book

This book was first created in response to the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States. Quite understandably, adults were scared and unsure of how to think or feel, let alone fully cope with the gravity of the tragedy. Adults charged with the care of children were further challenged – wanting to assure children they were safe while not being at all certain that was true. This guide is intended to provide insight into children’s development and how they might be thinking about and processing frightening news, and to offer practical wisdom and strategies for caregivers, family members, and others who care for our youngest citizens.

This version was developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with an entirely new section for parents, families, caregivers, and first responders. In the years since this book was first released, there has been a lot of research on development and trauma. We know more than we ever did about how children process trauma and stress and how adults can support them through it. We also know about resilience and developing protective factors that serve as a barrier for future trauma. This new information can be both insightful and practical for those charged with caring for children and helping them answer the question, “What happened to my world?”

Together, we have an obligation to raise and educate a generation of healthy, vibrant children who live in the world with confidence and wisdom, understand the natural world, and are committed to making the world a better place.

– **Jim Greenman**, Late Senior Vice President, Bright Horizons Family Solutions

GREENMAN, JIM

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Anything that is human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they can become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary. The people that we trust with that important talk can help us know that we are not alone.

– **Fred Rogers**, “Life’s Journeys According to Mister Rogers: Things to Remember Along the Way”

Introduction

Children’s lives have always been marked by change. Each day brings new revelations that life is filled with storms as well as sunshine. No child ultimately escapes the experiences of fear, loss, grief, or trauma. But some events – those that shatter their sense of security – put particular pressure on the adults in their lives to be at their best as parents and caregivers.

“What Happened to MY World?” is for parents, caregivers, and everyone working to help children and families make sense of a confusing, unpredictable, and sometimes violent world. It is designed to help adults support children’s fears, their grief, and their struggles to understand why. The world can sometimes become a very frightening place. It is to help both children who experience catastrophe firsthand, as well as children who witness it from a distance and wonder if they might find themselves in similar circumstances.

Children struggle every day and everywhere with life's darker side. The insights offered in this volume (understanding children's thoughts, behaviors, and needs during crisis) apply to any calamity, whether personal or social, such as the death of a loved one, exposure to violence or homelessness, or even the sudden loss of a parent due to foster care, divorce, or separation.

Fear, grief, anxiety, and despair have the same disabling force, no matter the cause. The understanding, compassion, and thoughtfulness required by the adults who care for children are much the same.

PART I explores the four pillars of security, various types of traumas and children's responses, special considerations, and an age-by-age guide on what to expect and how to help.

PART II looks at how children can begin to understand both the world of nature at its most powerful and some difficult aspects of human society exposed when disaster erupts: death, poverty, and racial tension.

PART III offers suggestions for building a strong team before a crisis and helping staff respond during crisis. Emotionally healthy staff are at the heart of strong, effective programs. We can't expect caregivers and others to create a warm, nurturing environment for children when they are struggling with powerful emotions. They simply can't give something they don't have.

PART IV provides strategic ideas for handling a community disaster or crisis. In recent years, centers, schools, and clinics have experienced community traumas, including natural disasters and lockdowns due to violent acts. In this section are listed tips (the ABCs of crisis) to help you prepare and cope with a community trauma.

The Resources section includes resources for parents and professionals to explore more deeply all the topics introduced in this book. There are websites and books for adults and children on coping with stress, understanding the natural world and coping with disasters, addressing questions about poverty and race, and developing plans for survival and recovery.

PART I: Children and Crisis

What Happened to MY World?

After a calamity, the primary questions children wonder about include:

Will I be OK?

Will you be OK?

Will everyone I love be OK?

Will the world that I know be OK?

Children may ask many other questions, but beneath those questions are usually these basic fears. Focusing on answering these questions (to the best of our ability) and establishing the four pillars described below is a good place to start.

What Children Need: Pillars of Security

There is nothing more basic than the need to feel secure: to feel that you are all right, right here, right now. We feel secure when the world is safe, predictable, and manageable. We know we can fit into that world as ourselves and will be accepted by the people we encounter. We can relax when we are with people we trust, know what to expect, or have confidence that our life experience gives us the skills to cope with whatever will come our way. This is the exact opposite of how we feel in a crisis.

Young children are perpetual tourists without much life experience, truly strangers in a strange land. They are developing their minds and bodies at such a rate that they are literally new people with each sunrise. Their backlog of life experience is so slight that each day, brings surprises. Their courage rises and falls like the tides. As we grow up and experience more of the world, good and bad, our life experience gives us more of a base, but we depend on four pillars of security to help us face life's struggles: people, places, routines, and rituals.

People: For most of us, the most insecure feeling of all is feeling alone – no hand to hold, no one to look up to, no one to warn us, and no arms to catch us when we stumble. Security comes from familiar and trusted loved ones who know and understand us and whom we know and understand. But if those people are just not themselves and behaving unpredictably (as often happens in a crisis), or worse, if we have no one and are surrounded by strangers, a calming sense of security is hard to come by.

Places: In our homes, we can relax. We take comfort in the familiar order, the sounds, sights, and smells. We know our way around and how things work. There are few surprises. Our treasured things are there to reassure us, as are our memories. An unfamiliar place makes demands on our awareness – we need to be alert. In our places, we have the freedom to find or create sanctuaries and places to pause.

Routines: Routines are patterns of actions and expectations, the familiar order of the day, and the tasks that we do protect us from fear of the unknown. The structuring of time into routines has an enormous impact on how we feel. Routines reassure each of us and stabilize groups – the regular meal, the prompt dry diaper, the inevitability of sleep.

Rituals: Our individual lives are orderly and meaningful with daily rites that have gained our affection: the first cup of coffee in our favorite cup, goodbye kisses, how we wake up or go to sleep, the routes taken to work or school. Rituals join routines and the physical order as the bind that holds individuals and groups together in times of stress and uncertainty.

The four pillars are not equal; certainly people matter the most. But places, routines, and rituals are essential and support the first pillar.

When you are a child or an adult in a crisis, all four pillars – people, places, routines, rituals – may become shaky or crumble and your world may feel as though it is crashing down upon you – strange people, strange places, strange routines, and few rituals.

The concept of the four pillars is simple yet powerful. Refer back to it often as you work with young children. Thinking about the four pillars (or a lack of them) in a child's life can build patience, empathy, and understanding. It can also offer you a starting point in working with children.

A Few Considerations

When working with children and families, it's important to remember that responses to trauma vary widely depending on the individual circumstances. Consider the following:

- ▶ Degrees of loss and trauma
- ▶ Vulnerability caused by poverty and lack of resources
- ▶ The effects of homelessness
- ▶ Toxic stress
- ▶ Spiritual or intellectual confusion

Degrees of Loss and Trauma

Every survivor has a story that deserves to be heard, but the range of trauma is extraordinarily wide. When disaster strikes, many lives are disrupted and lots of people are affected – some firsthand, others from a distance. Lumping survivors together diminishes all the dimensions of the horror that people experienced and continue to face. Some may lose little but their sense of safety and perhaps their optimism; however, neither of these are small losses.

Some lose loved ones or are permanently injured. Some (including young children) are separated from their families for weeks after a disaster with no way of knowing their fate. Some people lose precious items or key documents/proof of identity: birth certificates, IDs, photographs, financial papers, insurance documents, and school records. Others can spend days without food or water, or witness death and violence while fearing for their own lives. For many who have been through a tragedy, the sensory experience will never fully leave them.

People do not have to have a direct connection to a catastrophe in order to suffer as a result of it. Some children and adults are shaken simply by the surprise, size, or horror of the event.

We all feel and behave differently in response to trauma; the timing and intensity of our feelings and the behavioral changes that follow vary from person to person. Some take it all in a great rush that results in an open wound of emotion; others compartmentalize or push down feelings and try to manage or hide the response. The stress in each of our lives varies widely, as do the supports that we have to offset the large and small challenges to our well-being. But somewhere inside, we all feel frightened and vulnerable. A disaster in which a loved one dies or homes are lost is a different category of trauma altogether. The disaster is not simply a traumatic event; it becomes an ongoing, debilitating, and traumatic existence.

With time, care, healing, and sometimes treatment, the impact of the trauma typically subsides, but some develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The development of PTSD is not predictable and may occur in someone who witnessed an event and not in someone who lived through it.

Vulnerability Caused By Poverty and Lack of Resources

When disaster strikes, people with few financial resources tend to fare worse in nearly all cases. In a natural disaster, their shelter is more precarious, their “rainy day” resources nonexistent, and their ability to evacuate the scene hampered by no place to go and no way to get there. In an act of violence, health insurance coverage may be sparse and deductibles may be beyond their means. Getting the care they need to heal from physical and emotional wounds can be challenging.

Further, families living in financial hardship are often experiencing other life stressors like food insecurity or frequent moves due to affordable housing challenges. Some adults can shelter their children from these hardships, but most often children experience some level of stress in these circumstances, whether it is directly or indirectly via the adults’ stress levels.

The Effects of Homelessness

The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned. – Maya Angelou, “All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes”

Imagine what it is like to be a young child without a home, with only the clothes on your back and a sack of stuff that makes up your worldly possessions. If you were a child entering the world of homeless shelters, you would think, “What happened to my world?” This scary new world is cramped – and clouded by anxiety, uncertainty, and stress. At a shelter, it can be hard to find space to play, things to do, and quiet corners.

Bright moments are often hard to come by. Shelter life can be sad or scary, boring or chaotic. The adults around you are trying hard to protect you but are often sad or depressed, angry or worried – struggling to cope in an often overwhelming situation. Some days, if you are a kid, it can be hard not to get into trouble, because after all, you are a kid with lots of energy trying to make it through the day.

Imagine if you are that young child’s parent, trying to be a good parent and hold on to hope in a difficult situation.

Losing your home is a horrible thing. No matter how meager your home, no matter how few possessions, losing them is an emotional shock. Home is where we can be ourselves, in all our quirky individuality. You can open the refrigerator and get a drink, turn on or shut off the lights, sift through the photographs and mementos that chronicle your past. You can be silly, or noisy, or crabby. Home is where you have family, pets, plants, closets, toys, and your own blanket and bed.

When children lose their homes in a disaster or personal catastrophe, they may also lose pets and cherished possessions (their collections, trophies, gifts from special people). They might lose friends, routines, rituals, and maybe even their school. The whole architecture of their lives has collapsed. Their parents are often in distress, sad, or depressed – tired from the heroic efforts of making it through the day.

What is shelter life like for children? Crowded conditions, uncertainty and fear, no place to play or do homework, and no private space to pause. It's hard to keep clean and look good. Older children face social stigma, which often fuels feelings of shame, embarrassment, or anger.

The people who ran the shelter left us the MREs. An MRE is military food that you pour water on and it grows. –8-YEAR-OLD GIRL

Please note: Disaster changes us (and our children) in many ways, but we are essentially the same people. We are still shy or modest, or very private, or sensitive to noises or smells, or quirky in all the same ways we are at home. Kids still care about being clean or popular. Kids still want to have the right school supplies and all the things that “normal” kids have. Living in groups of strangers or as guests in the homes of others is difficult.

But helping homeless children begins by looking beyond their loss and current needs and focusing on their strengths. Don't forget what they do have: family, and the human potential for hopes and dreams. They may have families who have survived to this point by small and large acts of courage and determination, families with deep religious faith, or families held together by a strong sense of obligation and love.

Children also have the capacity to survive terrible circumstances. They are living the only life they know. Perhaps even more than adults, most children have a resilience and ability to adapt and orient themselves to new circumstances.

Existential or Intellectual Confusion

Events like the hurricanes, the Asian tsunami, and other disasters create more than suffering. For some children, the impact is less emotional and traumatic and more intellectual, political, or spiritual. Why did this happen? How did this happen? What do we do now? To them it might be important or interesting and they want to know more. This can be challenging for adults who may be suffering emotionally. It is important to empathize with the child's point of view and recognize that curiosity may feel inappropriate to us as adults but is perfectly normal for a child.

Disasters bring a welcome array of mental health professionals with useful advice on coping with trauma. However, it is important for professionals and parents to not become so focused on trauma that they see it when it isn't even there, and inadvertently induce anxiety when they find reactions that are relatively measured and mild. There will be a variety of reactions, and many of those not significantly affected may feel little more than the desire to continue to live their lives.

Children Need Our Strength: How Do We Feel?

Adults largely set the emotional landscape for children. Children depend on us to be strong and solid, to know what is happening, and to guide them through the shoals of troubled waters.

Once an unexpected tragedy occurs, feelings of vulnerability and insecurity remain for a very long time. The randomness of an event exacerbates these feelings. Despite the world getting statistically safer, it sometimes feels like disaster can strike at any moment.

Knowing how you feel and finding your way to higher ground is critical in order to help the children you love and care for. Even when they are babies, children see, hear, and feel our pain and despair, and they look to us for understanding, reassurance, and hope. They have a sixth sense that detects unease and uncertainty. **The first step in helping children cope with catastrophe is to sort through our own feelings and get the support that we need.** This cannot be overstated. Children need all the love, strength, and reassurance that we can muster. Their sense of safety stems from us, the big, strong adults who protect them from misfortunes that they never imagined.

The fires destroyed half the houses in the neighborhood, including the one next to ours, and our home was also damaged. It was pretty terrifying. Jasmine was 4 and she almost immediately seemed to lose a year of development. Always sensitive and cautious, she was now always afraid of everything: lightning, loud noises, us leaving. She wanted to be held, to sleep with us, to keep us home from work. But 8-year-old Ethan began to treat it as a big adventure. He threw himself into cleanup efforts, collected money for the now homeless families, and became a militant on fire safety – reading everything he could and lecturing us on safety. I have to give credit to my wife, Susan. She was first relieved, then angry, then relentlessly cheerful, optimistic, and tireless in helping the families who had lost much more than we had. Her patience with Jasmine (and with my worries) kept us going. It took Jasmine nearly a year to become her old self. I guess it took me a little longer. I found myself withdrawing because I got overwhelmed pretty easily with all the paperwork and rebuilding.

– A FATHER WHOSE FAMILY ENDURED THE WILDFIRES IN AUSTRALIA

Common Emotional Reactions to Trauma

If you have suddenly lost a loved one, you are in a state of emotional shock and grief. You will have to grieve and then face a new life without that loved one. If you are homeless, you usually arrive at your place of shelter in emotional shock, exhausted, despairing, and disoriented. More important, you don't need to just get over a great loss and restore your spirit; you need to construct a life and home for you and your children.

Shock: How could this happen?

Confusion: What does it all mean?

Fear or worry: What will happen next; where, when, and to whom else will this happen? Will it end?

Grief: For someone I loved, or someone else like me, or the person I was, or the life I led before.

Anger: At the people behind the tragedy, the people not helping, and the cruelty and unfairness of it all.

Guilt: Why them and not me? Could I have done more?

Shame and surprise: It's not like me to behave this way: angry, bitter, blaming, or scared.

Helplessness: How can I ever make my world OK again?

Sadness: Lives lost or adrift, children orphaned, futures turned to mud.

Isolation or alienation: I'm probably the only person who feels exactly this way, and I am not sure if anyone understands my feelings.

Hopelessness and despair: I'm not sure my efforts are worth it. What does it matter?

Common Changes in Behavior

Many people respond to trauma with some of the following reactions and changes in behavior:

- ▶ Appetite changes
- ▶ Change in sleeping patterns
- ▶ Anxiety and tension
- ▶ Headaches and low resistance to illness
- ▶ Crying or depression
- ▶ Anger or short temper
- ▶ Fatigue, apathy, numbness, or listlessness
- ▶ Hyperactivity or mood swings
- ▶ Difficulty concentrating
- ▶ Numbness or apathy
- ▶ Replaying events over and over

All these reactions are normal, up to a point. You are not alone in these responses. But when the reaction is intense and prolonged, seeking help is important for you and the children for whom you care.

Emotional Shock

Direct survivors of catastrophic events often go into the same emotional shock that follows the sudden death of a spouse, parent, or child. They become seriously dazed and confused and exhibit many if not most of the symptoms of trauma for days, weeks, or even longer if the circumstances continue.

To get through this period, survivors need:

- ▶ More than a bed; victims need calm, uncluttered surroundings that convey order and safety
- ▶ To return to routine instead of generating more change
- ▶ Practical, functional help, e.g., with details as small as finding keys to handling insurance and bank accounts

- ▶ Help mentally digesting new information – what they need to do, where they need to be
- ▶ The stability and reassurance of the familiar faces of friends, neighbors, store clerks, and librarians
- ▶ To avoid replays of their disaster, or any other disturbing events, as they can reawaken impressions of the all-too-recent catastrophe and rekindle their emotional distress

(Adapted from “Emotional Recovery After Natural Disasters: How to Get Back to a Normal Life” by Ilana Singer)

Note: The plight of families forced into shelter living is magnified because most of what they **actually will experience bears little resemblance to the advice above. They may have just a bed, no familiar faces, strange routines, and little support.**

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

It is important to avoid diagnosing yourself or others and to avoid the tendency to interpret temporary trauma as PTSD, but it is useful to be mindful of the condition and the symptoms. If you have any concerns, consult a professional. Of course, if you have urgent concerns about a person’s safety, contact 911.

According to the Mayo Clinic, “PTSD is a mental health condition that’s triggered by a terrifying event – either experiencing it or witnessing it.” However, not everyone who goes through these types of events develops PTSD.

Importantly, there is no shame in being deeply impacted by trauma. From service members to refugees to domestic abuse survivors, being profoundly impacted by trauma is a circumstance shared by many. Getting professional help right away is an important part of recovery.

PTSD symptoms are generally grouped into four types: intrusive memories, avoidance, negative changes in thinking and mood, and changes in physical and emotional reactions. Symptoms can vary over time and from person to person.

Intrusive memories

Symptoms of intrusive memories may include:

- ▶ Recurrent, unwanted distressing memories of the traumatic event
- ▶ Reliving the traumatic event as if it were happening again (flashbacks)
- ▶ Upsetting dreams or nightmares about the traumatic event
- ▶ Severe emotional distress or physical reactions to something that reminds you of the traumatic event

Avoidance

Symptoms of avoidance may include:

- ▶ Trying to avoid thinking or talking about the traumatic event
- ▶ Avoiding places, activities, or people that remind you of the traumatic event

Negative changes in thinking and mood

Symptoms of negative changes in thinking and mood may include:

- ▶ Negative thoughts about yourself, other people, or the world
- ▶ Hopelessness about the future
- ▶ Memory problems, including not remembering important aspects of the traumatic event
- ▶ Difficulty maintaining close relationships
- ▶ Feeling detached from family and friends
- ▶ Lack of interest in activities you once enjoyed
- ▶ Difficulty experiencing positive emotions
- ▶ Feeling emotionally numb

Changes in physical and emotional reactions

Symptoms of changes in physical and emotional reactions (also called arousal symptoms) may include:

- ▶ Being easily startled or frightened
- ▶ Always being on guard for danger
- ▶ Self-destructive behavior, such as drinking too much or driving too fast
- ▶ Trouble sleeping
- ▶ Trouble concentrating
- ▶ Irritability, angry outbursts, or aggressive behavior
- ▶ Overwhelming guilt or shame

Grief and Loss

Grief in Adults

Several psychologists have created steps or stages of grief, based on their clinical experiences. Caregivers probably don't need to become experts on this subject, but having some basic background knowledge can provide a framework for supporting families. Understanding these grief models can also help you take care of your own emotional needs while helping families work through challenging experiences.

Stage Models

Example: Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's "Five Stages of Grief"

- ▶ Describes the emotional reactions many experience after a loss
- ▶ The five stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance

Task Models

Example: Worden's "Four Tasks of Mourning"

- ▶ Describes the process of grieving/work to be done
- ▶ Typically include the following concepts: accept the reality of the loss; experience the pain of grief; adjust to an environment in which the loved one or object is missing; and withdraw emotional energy

A Proactive Task Model

Dr. Sharon B. Katz's task model is particularly useful because it gives some sense of control back to those experiencing loss while offering simple, actionable steps for working through grief. Most people will go through these steps after a loss, although how they go through them and what decisions they make are entirely personal and vary from one person to the next.

Being aware of the steps can help caregivers support grieving parents. For example, a caregiver can understand why a grieving parent might withdraw, seem distracted, or even seem rude. Staff members are better equipped to offer support, e.g., by listening or encouraging parents to take care of themselves.

Katz's task model steps include:

Managing the Pain: What to Do

- ▶ Set realistic time expectations.
- ▶ Have realistic mood and behavior expectations.
- ▶ Reestablish and maintain healthy diet, sleep, and exercise habits.
- ▶ Accept and allow crying and other forms of pain relief.
- ▶ Consider medication for anxiety, sleep, or depression.
- ▶ Take comfort in music.
- ▶ Read books about grief or those that offer comfort.
- ▶ Set appropriate boundaries for being around other people.

Continuing Bonds: What to Do

- ▶ Establish rituals of remembrance (visiting a gravesite, commemorating special days, etc.).
- ▶ Plan comforting memorials or remembrances.
- ▶ Deal with the loved one's personal effects in a way that feels respectful and appropriate.
- ▶ Consider and reconcile one's spiritual beliefs.
- ▶ Continue a relationship with the loved one through prayer, thoughts, or other means.
- ▶ Determine how to handle birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, etc.

Personal Reconstruction: Questions to Ask

- ▶ What does this mean in my life?
- ▶ How do I figure out what my life will be?
- ▶ Who am I now in the context of what has happened to me?
- ▶ How will I go on? What is my purpose now?
- ▶ Where do I put my old life? Is my old life truly over?
- ▶ Where do I fit in now?

Cultural Challenges

Additionally, as adults work through grief, they may experience the challenges of unhelpful societal or cultural experiences, such as:

Cultural Challenges	Examples
Unrealistic expectations for behavior	One should act a certain way while grieving.
Unrealistic expectations for time	One should "be over" grieving within a certain time frame.
Unrealistic expectations for outcome	One should look for closure at a certain point in time.
Potentially insensitive advice or comments	"God never gives us more than we can bear."
Unacknowledged or marginalized loss	Less visible losses might include divorce, infertility, a miscarriage, or the diagnosis of a child with a physical, developmental, or emotional disability.

General Thoughts on Supporting Adults

It's natural to wonder about what to do or to worry about what to say. While we can't always solve, change, or fix problems, we can offer quiet reassurance and support.

What to Do

Be aware of your own feelings about the situation.

Consider talking with teammates or your administrative team to gain perspective. This can allow you to separate your own grief from the families' and be more objective in your responses. Please remember when discussing sensitive information with others to do so in a private, sensitive, and professional manner that respects families' right to privacy.

Withhold judgment.

When parents are in crisis, their normal routines often collapse. They might send children to school without a lunch or forget to pay tuition.

Expect change and offer assistance when possible.

After a loss, people sometimes say and do things they typically wouldn't. Try not to take this personally.

Open the door for communication.

As soon as you hear of a loss, offer support, e.g., "I'm so sorry. I want to be there for your family in whatever way you need."

Follow the family's lead.

Tailor your responses to fit the family's needs. Some families grieve privately. Others appreciate being able to talk openly. A hug or gentle touch may comfort some; others might find physical contact invasive. Be aware of varying cultural practices and rituals around death, but don't assume that all parents of a particular culture subscribe to those practices.

Offer a few words of memorial.

Comments such as, "He had such beautiful eyes" or "I appreciated his sense of humor," are comforting and give the family permission to talk about the deceased person if they choose to.

Maintain a sense of normalcy.

Continue to talk with the family about a child's progress and growth. Parents often worry about how their child is doing during a crisis. They appreciate your reassurance that the child is going to be OK.

Taking Care of Yourself

To take care of children, you need to take care of yourself to the extent that you are able. Some ways to do this are to:

- ▶ Accept help from others offering assistance and support with daily responsibilities.
- ▶ Talk about your feelings, when ready, with adults with whom you feel safe, who will really listen without judgment or continual advice.
- ▶ Try to create a daily routine and rituals that support your current needs and those of your family.
- ▶ Eat right and get exercise and adequate sleep.
- ▶ Cry when you need to and seek solitude when you have to.
- ▶ Take breaks from the news and headlines.
- ▶ Take breaks from others who bring you down.
- ▶ Be gentle with yourself and others and be tolerant of the less-than-ideal behavior of yourself, your children, and others under stress.
- ▶ Try to focus on the good things in your days and in your life, and find the seeds of hope.
- ▶ Replenish your spirit with friends, faith, family, music, or nature.
- ▶ Seek help if you feel that life is not becoming more manageable with time.

After a disaster and especially if one is left homeless, many of the above suggestions are very hard to do. Often, the most you can do is try your best to be as gentle and accepting of yourself and others as you are able to be.

Understanding and Supporting Children

If you are a child watching the news, it never stops. If you happen to be 3 or 4 or 5 years old, still learning to navigate the confusing borders of time and space and what is real and what isn't, you are probably thinking that nature's devastation results in daily destruction.

Some children may also be wondering, "When will it happen to me?" This is the way many young children think when they see things around them. When a friend's sister dies of cancer, the television news reports a child in a fatal car accident, a cousin no longer lives with her dad, or the news relentlessly sensationalizes a child abduction, a child wonders, "When will it happen to me?"

Every Child Is Different

- ▶ Mara, even at the age of 3, paid close attention to TV reports of any threat – crime, hurricanes, earthquakes – and nightmares always followed. She worried over and intensely felt the loss of a pet, a friend moving away, and the sorrows of distant others.
- ▶ Six-year-old Alejandro, on the other hand, breezed through his childhood with only a brief pause for the real calamities that occurred around him in his impoverished neighborhood – never imagining it might happen to him.
- ▶ Kyle's (age 8) vivid imagination and his empathy for others left him seriously vulnerable when any tragedy crossed his path.
- ▶ Troy and Tyrel's 9-year-old responses to airplane crashes or devastating natural disasters were similar. While not appearing particularly upset, each needed precise answers on an infinite number of details about the destruction.
- ▶ And 15-year-olds Stephen and Carrie never let on that anything could shake their cool exteriors.

Children are different, both from adults and from each other.

But taking that seriously in practice is not always easy for parents and others who work with children. Children think very differently than adults, and at each stage of development they view the world through their own unique lenses. From birth, children have their own sensitivity to change, to unexpected events, and to distress. They respond to dramatic events and stress in their own ways and with differing intensity.

All children are vulnerable, but not equally. A child already grieving over a lost loved one (a person or a pet), a divorce, or a separation may be more vulnerable, as will children who have families in crisis or who are under stress for any number of reasons. Sensitive and empathetic children will also struggle more to come to terms with events that are disturbing.

All children, even babies, will feel the direct effects of a natural disaster or family crisis – the emotional upset in the air and the change in people, places, routines, and rituals. Life, as they have come to know it, is disrupted and they are thrown off center. Supporting children during times of uncertainty and stress begins with knowing the child.

Understanding Childhood Stress and Trauma

Types of Stress

According to research done and presented by the Harvard University Center on the Developing Child, there are three types of stress.

There is the **normal and positive type of stress** that accompanies everyday events like a doctor's office visit, meeting a new classmate or colleague, or an unexpected change in plans. It's also part of the package with positive events like a wedding or promotion. This stress is normal and good. This is most often accompanied by natural physical responses like a quickening heart rate. It's important to help children through these stressors, but not eliminate them. Children need the chance to develop healthy capabilities to manage these daily stressors. However, when someone is managing a lot of them at once or significant stress is occurring as well, these daily stressors can feel more overwhelming.

Tolerable stress is when a situation happens that causes more pronounced stress, like a moderate natural disaster or the loss of a loved one. It takes a more severe toll but is considered tolerable because it is buffered by supportive adults and otherwise healthy circumstances. The stress may be short or prolonged, but it is specific to the event.

Toxic stress is a prolonged level of stress and can have long-term consequences. This is experienced when a person suffers from things like ongoing abuse, homelessness, food insecurity, mental health issues, or an ongoing threat of or actual violence. This type of stress is persistent and is disruptive to physical and emotional development and can impact overall health.

Trauma: We use the words trauma and traumatic liberally, but in actuality they refer to physical or emotional events that are likely to cause damage. Trauma can happen in something specific like a car accident, the death of a loved one, or something that is pervasive or frequent like homelessness or abuse. The more grave the stress, the more likely trauma will occur. Distressingly, statistics tell us one in four children experiences some type of abuse or neglect, which most certainly leads to some level of trauma. Common signs of emotional distress or trauma in children are:

Regression: Reverting back to more childlike behaviors, e.g., an older child wetting the bed or sucking his or her thumb.

Withdrawal: A marked decrease in level of engagement in routine social situations, e.g., family dinners, play dates.

Increased challenging behaviors: A marked increase in challenging behaviors, e.g., tantrums, aggressive play.

Delayed development: Atypical development in one or more categories, e.g., language use or learning delays, memory issues.

Anger or extreme emotions: Seemingly unprovoked or inappropriately strong negative emotions that do not match the situation, e.g., emotional outbursts or fighting.

Misreading emotions or intent of others: Natural tendency to scan for the negative in overdrive, e.g., assuming others are talking about or "ganging up" on you.

Behavior as Communication

You may notice that common stress or trauma behaviors are those that often challenge and frustrate adults. It is important to recognize that without the skills to understand or communicate deep emotional issues, children's behavior is their primary source of expression. In fact, it's important to recognize that many adults never developed these skills or have trouble accessing them in moments of crisis.

The best indicators of distress in children are changes in their behavior. When infants are stressed, they cry. When infants are more stressed, they tend to cry more and become fussier. They are using the resources they have available to them to express their needs. When a caregiver doesn't understand this and instead responds angrily or withholds care, they enter into a cycle that can lead to toxic stress.

When supporting children through crisis, watch for behavior that is not typical for the child: for example, a normally outgoing child behaving shyly or withdrawing, or a child suddenly becoming clingy, irritable, or anger-prone. A teenager who is normally cool and distant may withdraw from the family even more. A child may regress to past behavior, such as thumb-sucking or defiance, being very dependent, or not showing the self-help skills of which he or she is capable.

Remember, not all behaviors or behavioral changes stem from a crisis. All the other aspects of life and development are marching on – adjusting to a new grade or school, friends moving away or changing, parents worried about losing their job, or a teenager not having a date

– all create personal stress that may eclipse societal turmoil.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

The term ACEs has been coined to identify circumstances (such as death, divorce, homelessness, neglect, or poverty) that would have an adverse impact on children and recognize the cumulative impact. Mental health professionals and pediatricians evaluate children's ACEs to more fully understand individual children's risks and recommend appropriate interventions. For instance, a child who is experiencing neglect is more susceptible to the effects of trauma during a disaster than is a child without any other adverse experiences.

Relationships Are the Key

The four pillars mentioned earlier – people, places, routines, and rituals – are all important in times of crisis. But people and relationships are the most vital to health and healing. In all situations for adults and children, compassionate, responsive, and reliable care is the most essential component of healing. Children need to know someone will be there NO MATTER WHAT. Whether that person always says or does exactly the right thing at the right moment is less important.

Have you ever played a game of tag? The game, although fun, can be stressful, but feels less so knowing there's a home base where you can regroup and take a deep breath before charging out into the field again. This is very similar to how young children behave at a park or another public event. They often venture out – some quicker than others – but occasionally look over to the adult for reassurance. "Look at me!" and "Watch this!" are familiar cries heard by every adult companion. This need to know someone is there for them unconditionally never fades, although it becomes less urgent as they get older.

However, when trauma strikes, this need is intense. Whether children are able to express it or not, they

need the consistent and reliable care of at least one adult. This means they can trust this adult to follow through on commitments, ensure their needs are met, and provide reliable compassion, helping the children manage the burden the trauma has caused. Sometimes this is all an adult can do, especially at first, and it's always the least an adult must do.

Grief in Children

Children grieve differently than adults. They might not have the verbal skills to articulate their feelings or the life experience to put them into perspective. In general, caregivers will probably find that:

- ▶ Children's behavior often regresses. They may cry or be clingy. Their sleep and eating patterns change.
- ▶ Children differ in their responses to grief according to temperament, age, and development.
- ▶ Children hear more and see more than we think they do.
- ▶ Children take their cues from the adults around them.

By Age

Birth to Age 2

Understanding	Behavior	What Children Need
<p>No concept of death</p> <p>Notices the absence of a loved one</p> <p>Notices changes in routine</p> <p>Picks up on adult emotions</p>	<p>May be clingy, restless, or tearful</p> <p>Changes in sleep, eating, or play</p> <p>Behavior regressions</p>	<p>A calm, consistent routine</p> <p>Patience</p> <p>Extra comfort and reassurance</p> <p>Simple answers</p> <p>Time to play</p>

Preschool: Ages 3 to 5

Understanding	Behavior	What Children Need
<p>Death is temporary, e.g., "He's asleep."</p> <p>Death happens to "others" but not his immediate circle.</p> <p>Death is reversible.</p>	<p>Changes in behavior, e.g., withdrawal, irritability, aggression, or clinginess</p> <p>Bad dreams; changes in eating, sleeping, and play</p> <p>Might make up pretend games about death</p>	<p>Consistent, calm routines</p> <p>Simple, honest answers/time to talk about their feelings</p> <p>Unstructured playtime</p> <p>Patience</p> <p>Participation in rituals or memorials</p> <p>Affection and comfort</p>

School Age: Ages 5 and Older

Understanding	Behavior	What Children Need
<p>Understands that death is permanent</p> <p>Might wonder if he or she caused the death</p> <p>Fears that others will die</p> <p>Worries about how the loss will affect his or her life</p> <p>Wonders about what happens to the body</p> <p>Begins to form spiritual ideas about death</p>	<p>Denials of death; shifts in perspective and mood</p> <p>Nightmares or sleep disturbances</p> <p>Shows lack of interest in previously enjoyable activities</p> <p>Repeatedly asks for details about death</p>	<p>Calm, consistent routines</p> <p>Honest discussions and permission to share their feelings</p> <p>An adjustment of expectations and workload</p> <p>Participation in rituals and memorials</p> <p>Time for unstructured play</p> <p>Affection and comfort</p>

Emotional Recognition and Regulation

Some of the most important work – throughout life – is to understand and appropriately respond to or handle emotions. This is a lifelong pursuit, so imagine how challenging it is for someone in their first decades of life, let alone first years. Emotional regulation happens over time as we mature; it is easy for children to be overwhelmed by their emotions. Children have big feelings with limited ideas of how to handle them. A significant proportion of behavior that challenges adults is a result of children handling emotions in the only way they know how.

This is exacerbated during traumatic and stressful events. Even when there is a more minor change, like a new routine, children can regress and be more prone to difficult behavior. They are doing this to manage their emotions with the tools they have. Regardless of traumatic events, adults can best serve children by helping them learn about their own emotions and how to respond to them, as well as find perspective and build empathy. This skill set will prove invaluable when coping with typical or traumatic life stressors. It can prevent stress from causing too much trauma or can help a child heal from trauma.

Building Social-Emotional Literacy

Ideas include:

Building an emotional vocabulary: Introduce new emotional words. Instead of saying “I am happy,” say “I am joyful.” Ask children about their emotions. If they say “I am mad,” respond with, “It doesn’t feel good to be angry or mad. How can I help you?”

Naming emotions: Whether making faces in the mirror, looking at characters in a book, or playing a silly game in a public place, try naming different emotions by looking at facial expressions and body language.

Reading books: Characters in books are an ideal way to study emotions. Talk about their feelings, the expressions they make, and what they should do about their feelings. Choose books that show a character coping with difficult emotions, such as, “Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day” or “Ira Sleeps Over.”

Play: Through play, children naturally explore real-world phenomena. Working through emotions is a frequent aspect of play. Children can “try them on” and practice how to react. Adults can interject some role-playing or ask thoughtful, provoking questions to prompt children’s thinking.

Difficult Emotions

Difficult emotions like stress, worry, and anxiety are part of the human experience. These are useful emotions and, although uncomfortable, they aren’t always bad. Sometimes they alert us to potentially unhealthy or dangerous situations, or they pressure us to grow. Contrary to popular belief, stress is not always to be avoided. Stress comes with change, even good change like new babies, marriages, promotions, buying a house, vacations, and more.

Similarly, worry and anxiety are emotions that are purposeful. They help us respond appropriately to stimuli. The problem is when we can’t shut these emotions off, don’t have the capacity to respond to them in a way that reduces or resolves them, or respond more profoundly than is needed in a given situation. For children, much of this can be remedied through the patient support of caregivers. However, it is always a good idea to seek professional help with any concerns or questions.

Resilience and Protective Factors

We all have a natural propensity for resilience. One of the seminal researchers on resilience, Ann Masten, coined the phrase “ordinary magic” to describe this quite common and powerful phenomenon. Simply put, resilience is the ability to recover from adversity.

Some children seem to bounce back from terrible circumstances and lead emotionally healthy and productive lives. Without the experiences and expectations of adulthood, it often seems children can recover and adapt to new norms more quickly than adults.

While a lot may depend on inherited personal qualities – e.g., intelligence, an even-tempered nature, or independence – resiliency can be nurtured. The key ingredient is at least one caring adult who believes in the child and provides role modeling and support, helping the child see his or her life as positive and valuable. It may be a parent, relative, teacher, family friend, or even an older sibling.

What frightens children in crisis is the feeling of total helplessness, the feeling that they lack any impact on the environment. Those around them may seem defeated. The caring adult who fosters resiliency nurtures in the child a positive outlook and a sense of personal power, or agency, and helps the child gain mastery over his or her environment.

It is important to nourish personal resilience at all times so it can be available when needed. We should not make the mistake of assuming children will be resilient despite life circumstances, stress, or trauma. Depending on the severity of the adversity and other life circumstances, personal resilience can fluctuate. As mentioned, when stress is severe, it leads to trauma that impedes and influences development.

Often likened to a bucket or a bank account, it can be filled up over time so that when some is emptied or withdrawn, there is more to draw from and it does not empty. The more secure a person’s social and emotional skills are, the more readily they can nourish their own resilience, or fill up the bucket or account. For optimal health and protection, this should be an everyday practice.

Children's Reactions by Age

Children Under 3 Years Old

Understanding

Pick up on the emotional energy of adults around them
May understand pain and try to comfort others

Behavior

Crying more than usual
Clinginess
Changes in eating and sleeping habits
Listlessness
Hyperactivity or aggression
Regressive behavior

What Children Need

Reassurance
Physical and emotional affection
Predictable routines
Peaceful surroundings
Limited or no exposure to conversations
or news about the event

3-to-5-Year-Olds

Understanding

Pick up on the emotional energy of adults around them

Some understanding of what is going on

Inability to separate fears from reality due to lack of understanding about time, space, and pretend vs. real

Want to comfort others

Anxiety about abandonment

Behavior

Irritability, anxiety

Increased clinginess or attention-seeking behavior

Need to talk

Hyperactivity, aggressiveness, or listlessness

Changes in eating and sleeping habits

Regressive behavior, such as having toileting accidents

Fear of the dark or of being alone

Behaviors that test adults

What Children Need

Reassurance

Physical and emotional affection

Predictable routines

Limited exposure to conversations or news about the event

Opportunities to play and reenact situations

Time spent in nature, physical exercise, and mindfulness activities

Art, music, and sensory experiences

Honest, but age-appropriate, answers to questions

Opportunities to help and feel a sense of control and competence

Time away from the traumatic event

Meaningful bedtime (and other) rituals

Primary School-Age Children

Understanding

- Understand what is real and permanent
- Lack perspective and context
- Want to understand and know more
- Expect honest answers and details
- Can think about what life is like for others
- Have realistic fears
- Often focus on their immediate circle – what things will happen to them or their family
- Interested in rules, justice, and right and wrong
- Black-and-white thinking
- Want to see justice done
- Want to help
- Interested in examples of heroes/villains
- Influenced by peers

Behavior

- Nail biting or thumb-sucking
- Irritability, whining, clinging
- Aggressive behavior at home or school
- Competition with younger siblings for parental attention
- Night terrors, nightmares, fear of the dark
- Avoiding school
- Loss of interest and poor concentration in school
- Withdrawal from peers
- Regressive behavior (reverting to past behaviors)
- Headaches or other physical complaints
- Depression
- Fears about recurring or new disasters
- A need to take on more responsibility for the family and care for others

Primary School-Age Children Continued

What Children Need

Nail biting or thumb-sucking

Irritability, whining, clinging

Aggressive behavior at home or school

Competition with younger siblings for parental attention

Night terrors, nightmares, fear of the dark

Avoiding school

Loss of interest and poor concentration in school

Withdrawal from peers

Regressive behavior (reverting to past behaviors)

Headaches or other physical complaints

Depression

Fears about recurring or new disasters

A need to take on more responsibility for the family and care for others

Recognition of their efforts
during the disaster

Opportunities to help others and participate in community efforts

Help predicting and preparing safety measures to be taken in future disasters

Opportunities to be away from the situation and respite from the focus
on the crisis or tragedy

Honest, but age-appropriate, answers

Role models demonstrating resilience and effectively
responding to adversity

Relief from adult expectations and serious situations. Avoid putting adult responsibilities on a child's shoulders, e.g., "You're the man of the family now," "Your mom is counting on you." Instead, help them build their age-appropriate contributions. "Thanks for adding a few more chores to your schedule. It really does help me."

Teenagers

Understanding/Feelings

- Understand difficult realities
- Watch adults' reactions
- Peers are very important
- Want to help and make a difference
- Feelings of powerlessness or anxiety
- Striving to be independent (during a crisis, this process is often interrupted)
- Can develop maturity and resilience through a crisis
- Very interested in knowing about the incident (may pore over news coverage)
- Avoid media coverage and conversations about the event

Behavior

- Appetite and sleep disturbances
- Headaches or other physical complaints
- Increase or decrease in energy level
- Indifference, withdrawal, or isolation
- A reduced sense of a future, loss of optimism
- Dark humor, cynicism, or depression
- Confusion/poor concentration
- Poor performance at school or truancy, fighting, withdrawal, loss of interest, attention-seeking behaviors
- Risk-taking behavior or a fear of taking risks
- Rebellion in the home, aggressive behavior
- Refusal to be cooperative
- Emotional detachment

What Teenagers Need

A peaceful household

To know that you are there for them when they need it (and want it) on their terms; this may mean, for example, late at night or after a period of "hanging out" together

To know your whereabouts (even if they don't admit it)

Your willingness to engage in serious discussions

To be offered opportunities to talk about feelings – yours and theirs – honestly, but without adults being intrusive and with adults listening rather than lecturing

Acceptance if they don't want to talk to you

Opportunities to talk to other adults, including professionals

Opportunities for them to talk about their feelings regarding natural disasters, the environment, poverty, religion, justice, tolerance, and other social, political, or religious issues

Your best and wisest adult perspectives on serious issues and your acceptance of their views

Time with peers for play and discussion

Opportunities to be physically active

Adults who encourage participation in social activities, athletics, clubs, etc.

Opportunities to help others and be involved in the response to a crisis

Group planning for safety measures
to be taken in future disasters

Structured but undemanding responsibilities

Encouragement and support to take care of themselves: eating well, sleeping sufficiently, exercising regularly

Temporarily relaxed expectations
of performance

Individual attention and consideration when they ask for it

Opportunities to be away from the situation and respite from the focus
on the crisis or tragedy

Recognition of their growing competence, maturity, and any of
their efforts during the disaster

Opportunities to take responsibility, help others, or improve the environment

Help predicting and preparing safety measures to be taken in future disasters

Relief from adult expectations and serious situations. Avoid putting adult responsibilities on a teen's shoulders, e.g. "You're the man of the family now," "Your mom is counting on you." Instead, help them build their age-appropriate contributions. "Our family is stronger because you have taken on some new responsibilities. Thank you."

Ways to Help Children Cope With Stress: A Quick Summary*

1. Be available.
2. Listen, listen, and listen some more.
3. Be honest and answer children's questions – at their level.
4. Respect differences in children – individual and age based.
5. Encourage consistency, everyday routines, and favorite rituals.
6. Make the environment safe for talking about feelings and thoughts.
7. Expect and allow for all kinds of emotions.
8. Give choices and be flexible – avoid power struggles.
9. Allow a lot of opportunities and different creative media for expression.
10. Encourage activity and play.
11. Support the child's friendships and social network.
12. Be a model as a human being.
13. Hug with permission.
14. Practice patience.
15. Support children – even when they're at their worst.
16. Expect behavior that is typical of a younger child.
17. Expect behavior that is beyond the child's years.
18. Help them live right – eat, rest, sleep.
19. Make bedtime special.
20. Resist overprotection.
21. Don't force conversation and interaction.
22. Understand that playing is a way to grieve and sort through fears and confusion.
23. Attend to their physical symptoms of stress.
24. Reassure the child that he or she is not alone.
25. Set limits on acceptable behavior and enforce them.
26. Remember and avoid, when possible, triggers that will cause distress.
27. Plan family time together.
28. Be available for help if needed.
29. Ensure children have role models who demonstrate resilience.
30. Take care of yourself.

* This list was adapted from "35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child" (The Dougy Center for Grieving Children).

There is no magic formula or single right way to respond to a child in crisis. It is important to know and respect each child's way of coping, even when it is different from our own.

When to Seek Help

Reactions to traumatic events may appear immediately or after several days or weeks. Most of the time, the symptoms detailed above will begin to disappear as the child and family readjust. But for children who experience disaster directly and intensely, or if symptoms accumulate or persist over time, it is wise to seek help outside the family with a counseling service, a religious advisor, a community health center, or through the children's school. A counselor will talk to your children to help them understand their feelings. Children should not sense any resistance to this type of care. Similar to needing medical care if a twisted ankle isn't healing, seeking support for mental health is equally important and without shame.

PART II: Helping Children Live in the World

Children need our views about life, the natural world, and social issues articulated in language they are developmentally able to understand. They observe not just what we say but what we do. How and what we teach our children depends on who we are: our civic nature; our spirituality; and our willingness to learn about events, respond with compassion and generosity, and pass that empathy on to our children.

Helping Children Understand Crisis and Catastrophe

When crisis or catastrophe envelops our children's world, the most important thing we can do, after ensuring their physical safety, is to be thoughtful and responsive to their emotional and educational needs. The family is a safe haven where children can express their ideas and fears with assurance that their parents will protect them and teach them about the world that they will inherit.

If a child's family does not provide this safe haven, it is important that other adults in their lives do. Most children have at least one caring adult in their lives, but it is the job of all of us to ensure they never have less than one.

Talking to Children About Crisis and Catastrophe

Many of the questions and concerns that surface in times of crisis have at their heart the fundamental questions:

- ▶ Will I be OK?
- ▶ Will you be OK?
- ▶ Will everyone I know and love be OK?
- ▶ Will the world that I know be OK?

Help the child:

- ▶ Identify his or her own fears through gentle conversation that follows the child's lead. Ask the child what they wonder, what they think, what they imagine.
- ▶ Always try to be realistic while reassuring the child that it is unlikely the catastrophe will happen again the same way. Assure the child that if there is a next time, "We will be ready" (even if you are not feeling entirely sure yourself).
- ▶ Respect the child's fears and remember that fear is not always rational.

In the aftermath of a crisis or catastrophe, children will have a range of reactions. If they have been in harm's way or vulnerable, their wariness, fear, and anxiety will likely increase. If they have only heard about it, they may be curious and even seem cavalier in response. Alternately, they may feel empathy and sorrow for the people who are experiencing it. Some of their reaction depends on how the adults around them are responding.

Young children have limitations in how they can respond to and process emotions, and a spectrum of reactions is normal. The comforting, thoughtful presence of an adult helps dispel young children's fears. Older children also rely on the strong presence of adults and their rationality and optimism.

In these circumstances, children need to hear that:

- ▶ People are working very hard to learn more about early warnings of natural disasters or violent attacks and ways to prevent loss of life and damage to society.
- ▶ As a family or school community, we will devise plans to be prepared and safe.
- ▶ I am always here for you and will do everything I can to protect you.

Answering Children's Questions

The aftermath of any disaster leaves us with hard questions to answer. Children need the opportunity to talk about the emotions and issues that are in the air around them. As they get older and their understanding of the world outside their home grows, they also need our honest answers to the larger issues: "Why is life so unpredictable?" "Why do natural and manmade disasters create catastrophe and tragedy?" "Why do innocent people die?" "Are some people more vulnerable than others?" "Can't we do something to help those more unfortunate people?"

Some questions may test our fundamental social, political, and religious views:

- ▶ "Is nature mad at us?"
- ▶ "Why do some people die and some live?"
- ▶ "Why can't people be saved faster?"
- ▶ "Why does our family have so much and there are many families who are hungry and have nothing?"
- ▶ "Why did we lose everything we had?"

Children need our best answers, or our honest lack of an answer. Sometimes all we can say is, "Bad things sometimes happen without a reason, but we will always do everything we can to protect ourselves so the chance of a bad thing happening is smaller." Use examples from your own life that they can understand, such as wearing a seat belt to protect themselves in case there is an accident or cutting up food in small bites to avoid choking. Children need our thoughtfulness and willingness to help them seek answers. No child will ever thank us for lying or avoiding questions.

Before Talking to Children

Even if we only have a moment to think about what to say and how to say it, try to remember to:

- ▶ Get your own feelings and thoughts straight. Have another adult listen to you first if you aren't sure you are ready to talk to a child.
- ▶ Try to be your most thoughtful, calm, and emotionally stable self when you talk to children. Be prepared for the inevitable difficult questions about what bad things could happen to us, why people die, and why some people live.
- ▶ Think not only about what you want to say, but also about how you want it to come across.

- ▶ Watch your words, tone, and body language. You may give a nonverbal message of sadness, anger, confusion, fear, or indifference.
- ▶ Ask children what they think the words that they are using or hearing mean: death, drowning, loss, weather, disaster, hurricane, looter, hero, terrorist, victim, refugee.
- ▶ Understand what they already know and feel before beginning any dialogue by asking, "What are you thinking and feeling?"
- ▶ Find natural opportunities to ask what's on the child's mind and follow his or her lead. Recognize the clues in a child's art, play, or conversations with friends. Accept his or her feelings. Read thoughtfully chosen picture books to support children's understanding.
- ▶ Check first before assuming either a lack of or strong interest. When you encourage a young child to draw, play, or talk about his or her feelings, you give permission to freely express scary or angry thoughts.
- ▶ Honestly share your feelings, but always try to be in control of your emotions in the presence of your children.
- ▶ Be strong in a crisis even when feeling sad, scared, confused, or angry. The child needs to draw upon your strength, not take care of you. Demonstrate resilience and optimism.
- ▶ Provide the child hope by simply sharing hugs or reassuring smiles that say "I'm here for you and we will make it through this."
- ▶ Adapt your response to a child's developmental level and needs. While a young child may need to hear "Lots of strong, smart people are working hard to keep us safe," an older child may need to help you plan what to do or help research efforts to prevent natural disasters.
- ▶ Try to monitor children's exposure to media coverage of disasters and crises. Children have not seen much of life or weathered many storms and can easily feel that everything, everyone, everywhere is coming apart. The quantity and intensity of television, radio, and newspaper coverage, as well as adult conversations during a crisis, can easily frighten children, and adults should try to manage those images. Very young children often do not understand that one incident generates weeks of repeated images. They also can't easily separate fact from fiction.
- ▶ Respect the growing ability of school-age children and teenagers to understand and discuss issues openly and honestly.
- ▶ Consider that natural disasters such as hurricanes and tsunamis will spark an interest in environmental concerns as well as issues of poverty and race for older children.
- ▶ Stay tuned in. Keep listening, asking, conversing with, and reassuring children as their thoughts and feelings evolve. Remember that every child is different. Your explanations need to match the child's developmental understanding and personality. Don't give more information than the child is ready for.
- ▶ Protect children's idealism. Children are born idealists: The world is a good place where nature is usually friendly and predictable, people are mostly good, and life is worth living. Sudden exposure to catastrophe or violence tests their idealism and optimism as well as our own. If children are exposed to too much of life's dark side, they may lose their sense of optimism and start to experience toxic stress.

- ▶ Stay alert to signs of stereotyping and racism. In times of conflict or exposure to societal issues, “us versus them” mentalities, ethnic and social class stereotypes, and contempt for behaviors different from our own may lead to racism and cultural bias. In times of crisis, we can inadvertently make harmful assumptions about groups of people and make false correlations. Though often unintentional, this can cause damaging, lasting effects. More than ever, we need to teach children to accept and respect cultural and social groups different from theirs and see the good in other people. Children need us to model tolerance, respect for diversity, and an interest in learning about other people, cultures, and countries. In every conversation, work toward greater understanding across ethnic, cultural, and social class lines. Be your best as a human being.
- ▶ Honor children’s need to have some control and find ways for them to contribute. Our sense of power is restored by taking steps to improve our own current situation or to increase our preparedness for future situations. Finding ways to connect with others in the community and around the world to show our common humanity has the same result. Younger children can draw thank-you pictures for police officers and help pack a natural disaster survival kit. Older children may also want to help create a family emergency plan, communicate with a pen pal, or collect donations. Teens may even want to research organizations to support, participate in community events or cleanups, or lead an effort to help. Having some control over circumstances that can feel out of control is a valuable part of healing and managing stress. The feelings of powerlessness and helplessness shared both by children and adults after a crisis are alleviated through action.

Older children and teens are cultivating their worldviews. This matures over time, but is heavily influenced by their early experiences and adult perspectives and opinions. Without a broad context, they readily and unconsciously integrate what they observe and hear. Help them develop a conscientious and curious approach to learning about the world by modeling these characteristics yourself, especially when it’s hardest to do. For example, if a group of people from one country or religion commits a terror attack, it is important not to generalize that all from that country or religion are bad or evil.

Answering Questions About Natural Disasters

What is a hurricane?

For preschool children:

Hurricanes are big storms with lots of rain and really strong winds. Sometimes everything gets flooded and lots of things get knocked down. We will need to go to a safe place or get away from the storm. We can get ready ahead of time to be safe.

For older children:

A hurricane is a powerful tropical storm that comes in from the ocean and brings lots of rain, lightning, and very high whirling winds of 75 to 180 miles an hour (as fast as a race car). They are also called tropical cyclones or typhoons and they get their energy from warm tropical water before they head to land, which is called making landfall. Hurricanes often cause flooding and tornadoes. They hit the Caribbean islands, the East and Gulf coasts of the United States, the Far East, the Pacific islands, India, Japan, and Northern Australia. In the United States, hurricane season is from June to November.

Hurricanes are predictable and can be tracked. Families and communities can prepare for hurricanes to make sure that no one gets hurt and property is protected. Some families don't have as many resources to do this and may be more vulnerable. There are organizations working to help those families. Our family will make sure that we are prepared for the next one.

What is a flood?

For preschool children:

Floods are when there is too much water and it covers everything.

For older children:

A flood is when lots of water flows into a dry area. Too much rain causes rivers, streams, or lakes to overflow their banks and flood surrounding areas. High ocean levels and high waves can also cause a flood. Sometimes, the structures used to control flooding such as dams, levees, or floodwalls break and the water released floods an area. A flash flood happens all of a sudden after a sudden rain.

Floods usually take time to develop, and the location can be predicted and planned for. Floods also happen when water flows downhill due to gravity. People who live in areas where flooding is common can be careful and plan to escape when floods are likely.

What is a tornado?

For preschool children:

Tornadoes are very strong storms with winds that can knock down anything. They are called "twisters" because the wind twists and twirls around. When there are tornado warnings, everyone needs to go to the place that keeps them safe, usually a basement or a room with no windows.

For older children:

Tornadoes form from thunderclouds and are the most powerful storms for their size. They have very fast swirling, twisting, sucking winds of up to 300 miles an hour (almost as fast as a jet). Unlike hurricanes, which swirl outward, tornadoes or twisters swirl inward and rotate around a funnel of low pressure. They look like upside-down cones. Tornadoes usually move above the Earth's surface at 35 to 50 miles per hour (mph) but can go up to 70 mph. When they touch down, they can suck up and destroy everything in their path, such as trees, trucks, bridges, houses and other buildings, and even farm animals. A tornado's path may be a mile or two or up to hundreds of miles. Most tornadoes in the United States strike in April, May, and June.

Tornadoes develop quickly out of a storm, and sometimes there is little warning that a storm has developed twisters. But people can be safe by listening for warning sirens and radio or television announcements, as well as having a safe place identified to quickly go to if a tornado is in the area.

What is an earthquake?

For preschool children:

An earthquake is when the ground starts shaking. The shaking may shatter buildings or break up roads. Or the ground may develop big cracks or holes. Many people are working to protect us from earthquakes and to help us be prepared.

For older children:

The Earth is divided into three layers: the core, the mantle, and the crust. Deep in the middle is a solid metal core that is very hot and also an outer core that is liquid. The outer core is about 1,300 miles thick and the inner core is about 800 miles to the center of the Earth. Next is a layer of hot minerals, called the mantle, which is flexible like plastic. The top layer is called the crust. All the oceans and the land are the top of the crust. The crust is typically about 25 miles thick beneath continents and about 6½ miles thick beneath oceans. The crust is relatively light and brittle. Most earthquakes occur within the crust.

Under the crust are tectonic plates made out of rock. These plates move all the time, but so slowly we can't feel it. The breaks in between the plates are called faults. Sometimes, a plate rubs or bumps into another plate and this causes an earthquake. Earthquakes create shocks and aftershocks that can be large or small. We may not even notice all the small earthquakes, but large earthquakes have destroyed cities and killed thousands of people.

Scientists are working hard to learn more about how to predict earthquakes and warn people. They are also working on how to protect buildings and other structures so that they can reduce the damage to life and property.

What is a tsunami?

For preschool children:

A tsunami is an earthquake that happens beneath the sea. The earthquake can cause a big wave to form that can come onto the land and cause floods.

For older children:

A tsunami, or tidal wave, is a giant wave of water up to hundreds of feet high (as big as a large building) that rolls to the shore and knocks down and floods anything in its path. The bigger the tsunami, the farther the wave will reach onshore and flood more land. Scientists hope to find ways to give people in coastal areas more warning before a tsunami strikes so that they can move farther away and to higher areas.

What is a mudslide?

Mudslides happen when there is excessive rain or flooding on the sides of hills or mountains. The solid ground becomes mud and slides down the hill, taking trees, buildings, and everything else down the slope.

People who live on hills or steep slopes can plan to get out safely as the ground gets full of water, before the mud begins to slide down the hill.

What is a wildfire?

Wildfires are fires that cover a large area where there has been very little rain and all the trees and shrubs are dry. Wildfires can happen just as easily in housing developments as in forests. When the winds are strong, the fire can be carried by the wind and then destroy an even bigger area. Wildfires usually happen in late summer and fall in areas where rain is scarce. Terrible wildfires have happened in California, Australia, and other dry areas. They can start because of lightning, careless people who drop cigarettes or forget to put out campfires, or other reasons. They can last for days or even months.

We can know when fires are likely to happen, and families can work to protect their houses and prepare to flee to safety. Professionals are working on new tools and systems to prevent and respond to wildfires.

Answering the Questions of Child Survivors

In the midst of any crisis, whether a violent attack or a natural disaster, everyone is scared, even the wonderful people who rescue others. Some were probably both scared and brave at the same time. Lots of people stayed scared for a long time and still have nightmares and scary thoughts. Police officers, firefighters, and soldiers all feel scared sometimes, too.

How can I feel better if I had to leave my home?

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in the United States suggests that kids try to remember six things (slightly adapted from the original):

1. Disasters don't last very long. Soon, things will be back to normal, even if the normal is a little different than what it used to be.
2. You can get a new routine even if you can't go home for a while or never go back to the same home. You will settle down into a new place and you will meet new friends.
3. Look to your parents or other adults for help when you feel scared or confused. They will help you understand what is happening. Don't be afraid to ask questions.
4. Sometimes it helps to write about your experiences or to draw pictures about what has happened. You can describe what happened and how you feel.
5. It's OK to cry during a disaster, but remember, it will get better.
6. You may be able to help out. Children of all ages can help in the shelter by babysitting other children, cleaning up, or serving food. You can even help with sandbagging or cleaning up your house after a tornado, hurricane, or earthquake, or by creating care packages for those in need.

My mom (or dad, grandparent, friend, etc.) is really sad and not herself. Sometimes I think it is my fault. What can I do?

Even if you are not the perfect kid in a time of crisis, how your mom feels is not your fault! Adults can be overwhelmed and confused by their feelings sometimes, too. When it's a bad time for your mom, don't take it personally. Like usual – but maybe a little extra – try to be helpful. She has a lot on her mind and, like you, is feeling sad and trying to figure out what to do. She will get better and will keep you safe. If you are ever worried about your mom (or anyone else) or she is unable to care for your basic needs, like food and shelter, talk to another adult – a neighbor, family member, teacher – or the police right away.

I miss my (relative, friend, pet). What can I do?

Remember all the good things about _____. Draw some pictures, tell some stories, and let yourself cry. If your _____ is separated from you or missing, don't give up hope that everything will work out. Remember that _____ loved you and you will always have special memories of your time together. It's OK to still talk to _____ or act out what you would say if _____ were still here.

Answering Questions About Military Engagement, War, Hate Crimes, and Terrorism

How Do We Answer Younger Children's Questions About Terrorism and Hate Crimes?

For younger children, as Fred Rogers said, "There are some people in this world who are very angry and haven't learned how to live with people they don't agree with." They come in all colors and live in different places. And sometimes they do terrible, awful things to hurt people. But there are many more people who know how to get along, and they are all over the world working hard to stop these people who do terrible things.

Terrorists are individuals and groups who represent only their own perspective, not any larger culture, religion, or community. Our anger, fear, and sense of powerlessness can sometimes cause us to feel and want to do senseless things – just like the terrorists did. Sometimes, decisions are made to respond and this can often escalate into military involvement. Most times, especially in our own communities, talking together, learning about others, and thoughtful problem-solving can help avoid rash behavior that leads to more conflict.

How Do We Answer Younger Children's Questions About War?

Keep it simple: "Sometimes, whole countries, after much talking, still can't decide how to get along. They have militaries that fight each other."

How Do We Answer Older Children's Questions About War, Military Engagement, Retaliation, and Seeking Justice?

This is a very hard subject, because adults don't always agree. Help older children understand that going to war is very unusual. There are many disagreements throughout the world and people do fight and go to war over them, but it is almost always a last resort. Children will hear adults talking about punishing terrorists and getting revenge, either as a tactic or a right. Just saying words like "revenge," "retaliation," or "vengeance" can contribute to a cycle of violence and should be avoided.

"Seeking justice" communicates to children the intent to live in a just world. Probably the best we can do is to tell children in a manner appropriate for their developmental level that sometimes the only thing that most people think we can do to stop very bad people or governments is to use military power. We can explain to children at their developmental level that we want them to learn how to live without violence and force, to use words, and to compromise. If all of us learned how to behave peacefully, no one would ever feel like fighting back. Discuss alternate solutions to war and conflict.

Children and War Play

Studies show that many children are fascinated with implements of action and power, particularly weapons. It is important to accept that many boys especially will be fascinated and drawn to warlike behavior: both attacking and defending. Children engage in this play to take risks, feel powerful (during a time when they have little power), work through fears, or feel like they're helping. For younger children, rather than quickly banishing or condemning warlike play, recognize that police

cars, ambulances, rescue helicopters, planes, boats, cranes, and trucks are also equally dramatic implements of action and power that help and rescue.

It is important not to shame children's exploration of violence through play and to remember that general statements like "guns are bad" can be confusing to children who have a parent who is in the military or is a police officer. Most of the time, they don't stop anyway, they just hide it. Setting safe boundaries is appropriate. "I notice you are playing police officers. I don't feel safe when you point pretend guns at me or other people. Can you find another way to play?"

What Do We Tell Children Whose Loved Ones Face Military Service?

Again, children need honesty and reassurance appropriate for their developmental level. If a family member is in the military, we can say, "She (or he) has a job to do and is trained to do that job. We are all a little scared and will miss her a lot when she is gone – and she is really going to miss us, too." It can help involve the child in activities that keep the loved one safe and connected. "We will pray (or hold her in our thoughts) every day and write postcards to her, draw pictures for her, keep a journal, and make a book of her letters. We can put markers on a map and trace her journeys."

What Do We Tell Teens Concerned About Military Service?

Older teens may be concerned about the draft, military service, the moral issues of war, or their own capacity for bravery and sacrifice. They need an opportunity to talk about it. What opinions or guidance you share will, of course, depend on your politics. What teenagers need most from adults on this issue (and almost any issue) is an open ear and acceptance of their feelings and ideas. They need guidance rather than preaching. We need to help them arrive at the positions and courses of action that represent their emerging adulthood.

Answering Questions About Religious and Cultural Differences

At the core of most conflict, whether on the playground or between countries, are competing perspectives and values, and a lot of misunderstanding. Having a sense of curiosity about others and humility about oneself can minimize a lot of struggles. If only this was as easily done as said.

Teaching and modeling tolerance, respecting diversity, and seeking inclusion are important responses to these issues and help develop children who can resolve issues peacefully. Children can learn these skills from the beginning. Unfortunately, they can also learn prejudice at a very young age. They can learn to fear differences, stereotype people, and reject others because of gender, color, race, size, culture, or any of the characteristics that become the object of stereotypes, including poverty. They learn this from the adults and children around them and from television, movies, music, and video games. They can develop negative attitudes about groups of people and apply them to individuals. Prejudice leads to scapegoating and discrimination.

Intolerance of others begins with ignorance and fear. Education is crucial to our attempts to create a more tolerant world. Children need to be taught about humanity, human rights, tolerance, the beauty of diversity, and how to be inclusive in order to combat images and stereotypes from the media and the world around them.

Answering Children's Questions About Death

For every age, the answer is a developmentally appropriate version of "Everything that is alive dies sometimes. Death is a part of life." Natural disasters, as with terrorism or war, bring the idea and reality of death to the forefront of children's lives. Adults create a climate of security or insecurity by their behaviors. If children experience a wall of silence or a storm of grief, they may not feel able to ask questions. Adults need to try to establish an atmosphere where children's feelings, questions, and needs are taken into account. Children react to how the adults in their lives react to death and dying. The personal feelings and behaviors that they witness will create a climate of security or insecurity.

Why do people (or pets) die?

While it is very sad when people or animals we care about die, we need to remember how wonderful it was to have our time with them and keep them alive in our memories. Children under 3 years old experience the death of a loved one as an unsettling absence or the presence of sadness or emotional turmoil around them. They simply need our presence, warmth, and strength. Older children need the same, but also our understanding of their feelings.

To preschool children, death is another mysterious part of life. If someone who cares for them dies, they often feel abandoned. It is the absence that counts because they don't understand the finality of death or the emotional weight of grieving. The death of others is mostly a big deal to them because it is important to us; it upsets them because it upsets us.

Because young children believe the world revolves around them, they may feel that a death was something that they caused. They need reassurance that the person's absence is not the result of their own actions or feelings.

Older children understand that death is permanent and share our struggle with coming to terms with the "why" of it: "Why now?" "How will we carry on and get over it?" Their grief and sadness can be as deep as our own if it was someone they love. They can begin to identify with the loss that others experience. The knowledge that death is final leaves them wondering about their own death and the possible deaths of people they know. They may feel that death is a punishment for those who died or their loved ones.

Reading books and having conversations both prior to and after the death of a loved one can help children understand that death is part of the cycle of life. Death is also simply interesting to school-aged children. They are often fascinated with the cause and details of the death and its aftermath. They understand death as a physical experience and often are concerned about the body, as many preschool-aged children would be as well: What happened to them? What will happen to them now?

Children and families who have or are experiencing the death of a loved one under traumatic circumstances need to draw on extended family and friends for support. They should also take advantage of the resources provided by employers and community agencies and the materials listed in the Resources section at the end of this guide.

How Can We Feel Safe and Be Safe? (for Families)

Children who have experienced a disaster, directly or indirectly, need reassurance that they will be safe. They have learned that nature is terrifyingly powerful. Now they need to know that no hurricane, flood, tornado, or earthquake is likely to harm them if they respect nature and are prepared. They need to feel in control and powerful through their own efforts and through those of the competent adults around them. The key to both feeling safe and being safe is to be prepared. The more that even very young children are involved in the process of planning safety efforts, the more they will see natural disasters as a part of life they can manage. Evacuations for a fire or tornado drills can almost become family events, even if they are a little frightening.

Have a family meeting:

Families need to prepare and make plans for what might happen. Talk about what situations the family needs to be concerned about. Also talk about the rescuers and heroes who are there to help the family if disaster strikes.

Make a family plan:

Together, create a family plan that covers what the family needs to do to be safe:

- ▶ Decide what will be done ahead of time to be better prepared and whom to contact (family, friends, work, and school contacts).
- ▶ Develop an emergency contact list of family, friends, schools, doctors, veterinarians, the police department, the fire department, and insurance representatives. Keep it in a central location, with a few copies in other areas.
- ▶ Create a safety map that includes:
 - Where to go in the house in the event of a disaster where staying in is advisable >
 - Evacuation plans that include where to go within or outside the neighborhood >
 - How and where to check in if the family becomes separated.
- ▶ Develop a pet survival plan that includes scenarios for taking the pet or leaving the pet behind.
- ▶ Identify guardians to take care of children if the parents are no longer able to do so.
- ▶ Take a first-aid class.

Make a family safety kit:

Together, decide what should go in the kit, where to keep it, and how to keep it fresh so it's ready when you need it. Depending on the type of natural disaster most common in your area, there are kit ideas online.

A few ideas for a kit may include:

- ▶ Flashlights and batteries
- ▶ Lighters and matches
- ▶ Candles
- ▶ First-aid kit
- ▶ Water (at least three gallons per person)
- ▶ Water purification kit or tablets

- ▶ Food (some nonperishable)
- ▶ Sleeping bags or blankets
- ▶ Radios and batteries
- ▶ A tarp
- ▶ Camping supplies (tent, lantern, stove, sleeping bags)
- ▶ Cash
- ▶ Medications and any necessary medical equipment
- ▶ Extra clothing
- ▶ Empty gasoline cans
- ▶ Plastic trash bags
- ▶ Copies of important documents
- ▶ Photographs of family members and family pets
- ▶ Names and numbers of important people: family, friends, doctors, and veterinarians
- ▶ Pet survival kit with food and water, medications, carriers and restraints, pet toys, plastic bags

Make each child a “my own safety kit”:

Have children prepare their own bags. With your help, let them decide what goes into the bag (and allow some child logic to prevail). Possible choices:

- ▶ Flashlights and batteries
- ▶ Snacks and water
- ▶ Favorites, such as stuffed animals and toys, pillow or blanket, clothes, books, and games
- ▶ Battery-powered radio and batteries
- ▶ Whistle
- ▶ Camera
- ▶ Journal
- ▶ Writing and art supplies

Have practice drills:

Practice what to do in the event of a possible natural disaster or fire. Assign roles for each of the children, preschool age and up. While this might sound scary to you, it will provide comfort and security to children by empowering them with skills and knowledge.

Make a helping plan:

Children (and adults) will feel stronger if they not only feel that they will be safe, but can also help others be safe during or after a crisis. Perhaps pack extra food, water, and supplies for others.

Helping Children Grow and Thrive

What Those Who Work With Children Can Do

Caregivers and other adults who work with children are faced with many difficult issues. Life in a group setting inevitably involves accepting or reconciling different viewpoints. We all bring not only our own personalities and emotions into our work with children but our own politics, religion, and world viewpoints as well. The news may be filled with stories about people and events we have strong feelings toward or know very little about.

Crises can bring out the best and worst in each of us. The worst: selfishness and simplistic answers, blaming, avoidance, bias, or proceeding as if nothing has changed. The best: thoughtfulness, caring, kindness, courage, and the opportunity to guide children to important learning. Children learn from how people and communities respond in times of crisis. Adults need to model and teach the following:

Thoughtfulness: We need to make an effort to understand what others think and develop a broader perspective that respects the natural world and its relationship to people around the planet.

Caring: We are not alone. We live in a world of communities of children and families. Our interdependent future depends on mutual caring.

Kindness: Human beings here and around the world are hurting, and we can all take action to help in some way.

Courage: It takes courage to confront the power of nature and to accept differences. It takes courage to help others in their confusion, fear, loss, or grief while we tend to our own.

Learning: It will help others and us if we keep learning more about the world of nature, the wider world of people and culture, and the close-up world we inhabit.

Responsibility: It is our planet, our society, and our community. We need to take care of the world that we live in today and our children will inherit. Create opportunities for cooperation, such as projects, chores, and decision-making. Help children construct their own solutions to disagreements.

Develop emergent curriculum: Create projects based on children's current interests and concerns.

Use conflict to learn: Take advantage of disagreements far away and in the room to learn about conflict resolution, acceptance, and self-control. Provide materials that encourage children's play and expression representing their feelings and thoughts. Children need to work through issues; allow fantasy play or art as long as it does not hurt others.

Celebrate differences: Go beyond acceptance and tolerance. Research and celebrate differences in identity, culture, and beliefs. Notice unfairness and injustice in daily life and the news. Find the hope and goodness in every dark moment: the caring, helping, courage, tolerance, and compassion.

Help children take action, and take action with them: Write letters, send pictures, raise money, and connect with others. Take humanitarian action: International and national relief efforts always need support. Encourage empathy by allowing the safe and respectful discussion of feelings of hurt, fear, loss, and doubt (never forcing participation). Become language sensitive and teach children to be alert to hurtful language. Value and respect individual children, and try to eliminate stressful situations when necessary (new transitions, unnecessary challenges).

Treat parents as partners. Keep them informed and involve them in your efforts.

While parents should use children's questions and statements as "teachable moments" to impart their moral and religious thinking and values about basic issues, caregivers should help children with anxiety, confusion, or interest without expressing their own religious or political views.

Provide learning opportunities:

- ▶ Expand children's knowledge of the natural world through projects and experiments that involve growing things or measuring and tracking rain, snow, the speed of wind, or temperature.
- ▶ Provide pictures, music, films, food, art, excursions, and visitors to learn more about nature.
- ▶ Provide books at the appropriate developmental level that address the issues of natural disasters, poverty, respect for others, conflict, and overcoming fear and adversity.
- ▶ Ensure that the curriculum includes children's current interests and concerns.
- ▶ Teach children the difference between fact and opinion and how to discern from sources of information.

Help children cope and succeed:

- ▶ Provide materials that encourage children's play and expression of their feelings and thoughts. Children need to work through issues, so allow fantasy play or art as long as it does not hurt others.
- ▶ Value and respect individual children, and try to eliminate stressful situations when necessary (new transitions, unnecessary challenges).

Encourage an active, democratic process:

- ▶ Sustain or create a democratic group in the classroom with participatory decision-making. Make the group safe for discussion of conflicting ideas.
- ▶ Create opportunities for cooperation: projects, chores, and decision-making.
- ▶ Prioritize character and empathy development and environmental learning and stewardship.

Grow good people:

- ▶ Celebrate all the beauty of diversity. Research and respect differences in identity, culture, economic differences, and beliefs.
- ▶ Notice poverty, unfairness, and injustice in daily life and the news, and call children's attention to them as appropriate.
- ▶ Encourage empathy by promoting the safe and respectful discussion of feelings of hurt, fear, loss, and doubt (without forcing participation).
- ▶ Become sensitive to hurtful language and teach children to be alert to it.
- ▶ Try to find hope, goodness, and courage in every tragedy. Help children see caring, courage, tolerance, and compassion in them.

Grow good citizens:

- ▶ Help children take action, and take action with them; for example, write letters, send pictures raise money, and connect with others.
- ▶ Involve children in local and global humanitarian efforts.

Work with families:

- ▶ Treat families as partners. Keep parents and family members informed and involve them in your efforts.

Trauma-Informed Care

Trauma-informed care has become a frequently used phrase, but many aren't clear on its meaning. Simply stated, it means that the care a child is receiving is informed or influenced by an understanding of trauma and its impact on development and behavior. This leads to increased sensitivity and individualization. For example, if a child is behaving aggressively, he or she could receive severe consequences. In trauma-informed care, the adult response would recognize the aggression is a symptom of trauma and respond with interventions that treat and heal rather than simply suppress.

While parents can recognize the signs of trauma and the need for trauma-informed care, it is important to seek support and professional help when you suspect a child needs this type of care. The entire family deserves support and healing. Caregivers can be an integral part of the community of caring that a child deserves. Seeking additional expertise in trauma-informed care is valuable for all who work with children.

Strengthening Children's Understanding of the World

All but the youngest children are aware that we live in a big world with many countries and many different kinds of people. The world beyond our borders becomes more real to us during international conflict. Interest in a crisis presents an opportunity to help children learn about the world and all its people and to connect with them. Use books and the media to explore the world's peoples and environments. As children grow up, introduce different ethnic foods. Learn more about the nationalities represented in your child's care center or school.

Promoting Tolerance and Respect for Others

Children will mirror what adults say and do, which gives us the opportunity to promote inclusion. If children express fear or antagonism toward a group of people, ask them to explain what they are thinking and feeling. If they share something that doesn't sound like it came from them, ask gently where they heard it so you can offer alternative, correct information.

Tolerance and respect for other cultures begin at home, but school and education are crucial to create a more understanding and tolerant world. Together, educators and families can prevent dehumanization, prejudice, and stereotyping.

- ▶ Become aware of your own biases and watch what you say about others. Be a model for respect for diversity.
- ▶ Create a multicultural environment in your home or school, and show that you value diversity in culture and social class. Expose children to other cultures and social groups through books, media, restaurants, festivals, and personal experiences with friends, coworkers, and the community.
- ▶ Use accurate and fair contemporary images of cultural groups rather than stereotypes.
- ▶ Listen to and answer children's questions about others with respect and accuracy.
- ▶ Banish teasing or rejection, particularly when it is based on identity: gender, race, ethnicity,

religion, size, age, or physical characteristics.

- ▶ Provide experiences and discussions that explore similarities between people and center on positive dimensions of differences and appreciation of them among people and cultures.
- ▶ Help children learn the difference between feeling proud of one's heritage and feeling superior to others.
- ▶ Teach children (and adults) to recognize stereotypes and caricatures so they don't use them unknowingly.
- ▶ Teach children how to challenge bias about themselves and others in nonconfrontational ways.
- ▶ Help children develop their understanding of fairness and justice, as well as identify injustice.
- ▶ Encourage children to take action to make their community a better and fairer place.

Ultimately, respect and tolerance require real relationships with real people. We must make an effort to bring children and families from different cultures together to truly come to know each other.

Adapted from "Teaching Young Children to Resist Bias: What Parents Can Do" (Sparks et al., NAEYC: Washington, D.C.).

Strengthen Children's Understanding and Connection to the Natural World

Our planet is a wonderful place for life. The natural world – the Earth, sun, wind, water, and fire – all work together to make it possible for us to live. But nature is far more powerful than human beings and there are times that natural events create terrible conditions for people. Understanding and respecting the planet and all its forces of nature is important for safe living.

All but the very youngest children can learn that nature is a powerful force in shaping and sustaining life on the planet. Children need to understand that all the powers and properties of nature are interrelated. Human beings are just one part of it. There is a purpose for natural phenomena, and even the most negative events can have positive effects: Floods distribute soil to farmland, for example, and wildfires help create new forest growth.

Here are some ways to help children learn to respect the natural world and feel their relationship to the Earth:

- ▶ Expose children to the outdoor world of streams, rivers, lakes, the ocean, stormy weather, hills, and mountains so that they develop a sense of familiarity and safety in the presence of natural forces.
- ▶ Involve children in gardening to help them understand natural cycles.
- ▶ Use books, the media, and the Internet to explore the world of nature and environmental issues as well as learn about catastrophic events. Learn how floods, wildfires, earthquakes, hurricanes, and other natural phenomena have a purpose in maintaining the health of the planet.
- ▶ As a family, become more aware and active around environmental issues and become activists in promoting policies that respect nature and reduce the likelihood of damage to the environment and destruction to human society.

Finding the Strength and Goodness in Children

Disasters and crises are not only about needs. Although catastrophes may expose our frailties and vulnerabilities, they also can uncover our strengths, courage, and goodness. That is true for children as well. Author Robert Coles, in “Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear” (Atlantic/Little Brown, 1964, p. 329), observed more than 50 years ago that a middle-class parent was more interested in what was good for his children than what good he might ask of them. Coles was struck by the contrast with the “goodness” and moral courage that he saw in action as 6-year-old Ruby Bridges almost single-handedly integrated the schools of New Orleans, and other young black children all over the South joined the front lines of the American civil rights movement, facing angry mobs, water hoses, and police dogs. His observation applies today: Many of us as parents spend more time trying to provide the goods and the good life for our children than finding the goodness in our children.

Even young children are capable of courage, compassion, and contributions to the community if we involve them in the life outside the home. Even the youngest can be part of a disaster relief effort. Recognizing and honoring their individual and developmental capacity and competence not only helps children cope, but it is the essence of raising children to be contributing members of the society that they will inherit.

What Happens Now? Toward a Better World

In times of crisis, it is important to find strength and reassurance in our communities, our diversity, and our common commitment to learning how to develop a better world. Horrific natural disasters that create large-scale destruction can bring into focus that we are one planet – a planet that our children will inherit. How we live our lives, the resources we consume, and the policies our governments pursue all have an effect on the natural world. Children need to be taught about nature and the Earth; the natural forces that can affect our own lives and the lives of children and adults around the globe. Children need to develop empathy and a thoughtfulness that underlie their judgment. They need to learn how to work together to solve problems and draw upon the strengths of their family, their community, the nation, and the world.

A catastrophe or crisis that spurs us to respond with compassion and support can also remind us that pain and suffering, grief, or loss are not confined to world-shattering events. Every day, children around the world need our compassion and support for tragedies and struggles both large and small.

Children are always surrounded by heroes. In addition to the firefighters, police officers, rescue workers, armed forces, and all those who helped the victims or survived the devastation, there are others:

- ▶ Parents, caregivers, and other adults who give children their strength when they themselves are overwhelmed with their own feelings of uncertainty, fear, or grief.
- ▶ Children who help protect themselves and their families, acting bravely as they flee or endure natural disasters.
- ▶ Children and adults who recognize they can support others in crisis and provide time, energy, or material resources to help.

When the winds are howling, when the noise is deafening and the darkness grows, or when the ground shakes or opens up, children need all the shelter and light that we can bestow upon them. We need to always remember that children have the strength and goodness within them to make the world a better place in the future.

PART III: Supporting Professional Caregivers through Grief*

Emotionally healthy staff are at the heart of strong, effective programs. We can't expect caregivers and others to create a warm, nurturing environment for children when they are struggling with powerful emotions. They simply can't give something they don't have. This section offers some perspective and information on how to support staff through grief.

The Unique Needs of Professional Caregivers

Much has been written about supporting staff through grief in the workplace, but the needs of caregivers vary widely from those in other professions for several reasons:

- ▶ Staff develop deeply personal relationships with their clients.
- ▶ Caregivers and others must maintain an emotionally stable environment.
- ▶ Change is constant in child care centers, shelters, hospitals, and similar settings.

Personal Relationships

Staff become very personally connected to their clients – children and families. When clients experience loss, caregivers are often directly impacted. Children and families rely on caregivers to provide a safe, comforting, dependable environment after a loss, even when the caregiver might be processing his or her own feelings about a situation.

Additionally, the range and scope of experiences a caregiver encounters are vastly larger than those encountered by employees in other industries. In a given day, a caregiver might comfort a child whose pet died, encourage a parent who is grieving over the diagnosis of a disability, or support parents who are facing divorce.

Emotional Stability

In many industries, an employee struggling with a loss can close the office door and “muscle” through his or her work while quietly and privately dealing with grief. Caregivers don't have the option of retreating to a private office during difficult times. They're in the classroom, clinic, shelter, etc., where children and adults need them to be present, engaged, and involved. This reality can tax a caregiver's emotional reserves, potentially leading to burnout and other negative outcomes.

Constant Change

Perhaps more than any other industry, caregivers work in an environment of constant change. Children and families enroll and depart. Children move to new classrooms or new schools. Staff turnover tends to be higher than in other industries. All these realities can cause stress and grief for staff, but are rarely acknowledged.

*The term professional caregiver refers to anyone who cares for children professionally, including teachers, therapists, clinicians, medical personnel, social workers, and others, rather than parents, grandparents, families, and guardians.

Creating a Safe Place for Professional Caregivers

Acknowledging and talking about these challenges goes a long way in diffusing some of the stress caregivers feel. In the following segments, you'll find more specific ideas on building a staff community that fosters healthy emotional expression for caregivers.

What to Do

Build Community

Child care centers, clinics, and schools are inherently different than many workplaces. We are in the business of dealing with human relationships and emotions, day in and day out. Caregivers need and deserve a warm, comfortable environment just as much as the children do. By building a strong sense of community in the setting **before** a crisis or loss occurs, we ensure that caregivers find the support they need during difficult personal situations.

The culture and environment can either nurture staff's emotional growth or hinder it. Every member of the staff plays a part in how the community feels. Think about how well your organization fosters emotional well-being for staff. Below are a few ideas to consider:

- ▶ Create a warm, welcoming space for staff. This might take some creativity, depending on your floorplan, but try to consider it a necessity rather than a luxury.
- ▶ Work on establishing a healthy community culture in your center. Say no to gossip and encourage staff to communicate, work together, and build friendships.
- ▶ Spend time on building relationships. Be transparent in your expectations and think about how to divide responsibilities in a way that fosters growth while reducing competition.
- ▶ Plan occasional social activities and use staff meetings effectively to build community.

Be Prepared

- ▶ Remember the tasks of grief described earlier, as well as the general tips for supporting adults.
- ▶ Stay up to date on company policies so you know (and can answer) questions about insurance, benefits, and medical leave.

Ideas for Specific Situations

When an Employee Suffers a Loss

- ▶ **Respond immediately.** Reach out to an employee as soon as you learn of a loss. Express sympathy and ask what you can do to help. Listen to the employee and respect his or her wishes,

particularly around disclosing the loss to others. Send condolences, such as flowers or a note. Continue to check in with the employee, e.g., “It’s been a few weeks since David died. How are you doing?”

- ▶ **Avoid making assumptions.** Grieving doesn’t unfold in a neat, orderly timeline. Don’t assume that an employee should be “over” his or her grief. For most people, the pain of grief lessens with time but the loss never leaves. Keep the door to communication open. Understand that the employee might not perform at his or her usual level initially. Be patient and sensitive. Talk about possible solutions. For example, perhaps another teacher could lead group times or perform other tasks that require high energy or lots of interaction with others.
- ▶ **Navigate workplace changes.** Immediately after a loss, an employee might need time off. Going forward, continue to check in with the employee. Watch for signs that he or she needs additional support, such as frequent absences or tardiness, loss of interest in work, or reduced performance. Step in sooner rather than later. Encourage the employee to use the resources available through human resources.
- ▶ **Recognize the impact on staff members.** When an employee experiences the death of a family member or other loved one, your immediate concern will be for that employee. Don’t forget, though, that depending on the closeness of their relationship, other employees might be affected, too. You, too, might find yourself grieving with the employee. All these reactions, while difficult, are present because you’ve developed close, intimate relationships and because your staff cares about one another. Focus on nurturing those relationships and providing comfort.

When an Employee Is Ill

When an employee becomes seriously ill, the entire community will probably be impacted. You and your staff might feel intense grief, wonder how to help, or worry about how these changes will affect your team. It’s important to allow yourself – and your staff – to grieve and nurture each other while continuing to take care of the children and other daily responsibilities. Below are a few ideas:

- ▶ **Expect a variety of reactions and emotions.** Depending on the intimacy of your relationships, you and your employees may feel intense sadness or concern.
- ▶ **Respect the sick person’s privacy.** Your employee must decide how much information he or she wants to share with others regarding the illness. Communicate clearly so you understand the employee’s wishes. Always ask for permission before you share information.
- ▶ **Consider workload changes.** Your employee might need to take time off from work or be unable to fulfill all his or her usual responsibilities. Talk with staff about how to realign these responsibilities so the children’s care isn’t compromised yet staff feel supported and capable of dealing with the changes. Let staff know that you appreciate their efforts, but watch for signs that people are doing too much. Consider bringing in additional help.
- ▶ **Ask how to help.** Talk with the employee about how the team can best support him or her. For example, after a surgery or treatment, an employee might feel overwhelmed by lots of visitors or emails, but appreciate a few cards, a dinner, or a gift card for food. Continue to invite the employee to social events, such as a holiday party. Keep him or her updated on happenings at work. Encourage team members to keep in touch through emails, phone calls, or short visits as appropriate, perhaps assigning one person as a single contact point.

When an Employee Dies

Because of the nature of our work, we often develop very close relationships with coworkers and employees. When a staff member dies, the team may grieve deeply. Below are a few ideas for supporting your staff:

- ▶ **Allow time to memorialize and remember the staff member.** Participating in an event or ritual to celebrate the staff member's life can offer comfort. Staff members might attend memorial services or plan an activity at work, such as a fundraiser, in honor of the deceased. Acknowledge the staff member's contributions occasionally on an ongoing basis. Remember enjoyable experiences, e.g., "This reminds me of the song Alice sang at the end of the day."
- ▶ **Expect and be comfortable with intense reactions of grief.** Allow yourself to grieve and keep an open door for others to talk to you. Talk about the deceased employee, remembering special times together. Plan a memorial activity or ongoing project; for example, create a library in honor of a team member who loved books.
- ▶ **Be aware of challenges.** Watch for signs that a staff member needs additional support, such as excessive absenteeism or a loss of interest in work. Encourage staff members to use human resources benefits or join a support group.
- ▶ **Take care of yourself.** You can't help your staff if you're overwhelmed yourself. Be aware of your own reactions to grief. Talk with others, meditate, journal, go for walks, or do other activities that offer comfort.

PART IV: Handling Community Traumas

In recent years, centers, schools, and clinics have experienced community traumas, including natural disasters or lockdowns due to violent acts. In this section are listed a few tips (the ABCs of crisis) to help you prepare and cope with a community trauma, including:

- ▶ **Assessing and responding during a crisis**
- ▶ **Building and restoring after a crisis**
- ▶ **Caring for ongoing needs**

Responding to Community Trauma or Terrorism

We live in a world that is full of much beauty and goodness. This world can also be unpredictable or even ugly. As caregivers, we can play a vital role in helping children, families, and communities heal through difficult community events, including accidents, natural disasters, acts of violence, or even the death of a beloved teacher or director.

These experiences challenge even the most seasoned caregivers and directors. We're often dealing with our own grief and fear while trying to offer reassurance and support to those around us. In this section, you'll find some practical tips for when the unthinkable happens.

Assessing and Responding During a Crisis

What to Expect

- ▶ **Expect a variety of responses.** People respond in varying ways to a crisis, depending on their temperament and previous experiences.
- ▶ **Expect confusion.** In a crisis, you probably won't have all the information you need immediately.

What to Do

Boil Down the Problem to the Basics

- ▶ Gain clarity through communication.
- ▶ What is the problem?
- ▶ Prioritize your responses:
 1. Physical safety and well-being
 2. Emotional safety and well-being
 3. Gathering information and identifying resources
 4. Restoration

During a crisis, the appropriate response is that of triage – assessing damages or dangers and offering safety and care:

- ▶ **Make sure the children are safe.** Keep your composure and focus your attention on creating a calm, reassuring environment. You may have to wait to process your own feelings until later. One way to do this in a crisis is to ask the question, “What does this situation demand of me right now?”
- ▶ **Communicate quickly with parents.** In particular, parents want to know what you are doing to keep their children safe and what they need to do to help.
- ▶ **Get the facts.** Rumors tend to run wild during a community trauma. Wait to offer any information or opinions until the facts have been confirmed.

Building and Restoring After a Crisis

After a crisis has been resolved, the work of rebuilding begins. This process may take days, weeks, or even months, depending on the nature of the situation. Generally, some members of the population will be directly affected while others are indirectly affected.

What to Expect

- ▶ **Expect change.** The period after a crisis is generally marked by change. Depending on the nature of the crisis, staff and families might leave. You might need to revisit policies.
- ▶ **Expect conflict.** The fear experienced during a crisis doesn’t always dissipate when the crisis is over. Staff and families might express varying opinions on what should happen next.

What to Do

- ▶ **Offer support sessions for both parents and staff.** Depending on the crisis, it may be appropriate to ask a mental health professional to conduct these sessions. Additional training sessions may be needed for staff. It may be helpful to add details about how this could be arranged, such as: “Your RM/HR business partner can provide assistance with arranging these sessions.”
- ▶ **Encourage caregivers and parents to get the support they need to process the crisis.** Take care of your own emotional health as well.
- ▶ **Avoid overexposure to the media and try to keep perspective.** Many people who have lived through traumatic community events report that the media’s portrayal of the event was often inaccurate and actually added to their trauma. Continuously watching and rewatching media feeds can create a skewed perspective that the world is wholly unsafe, which can lead to feelings of hopelessness. Get the information you need and then focus your energy on grieving, healing, and rebuilding. Do not allow children access to television or radio coverage.
- ▶ **Plan memorial activities.** These activities give adults and children a positive, actionable focus for their grief and can provide comfort and build unity. Sharing grief as a community can be a powerful experience.
- ▶ **Provide a printed handout to parents** with suggestions on how to manage this at home.

Coping Strategies for Adults

- ▶ Address basic physical and emotional needs.
- ▶ Seek accurate and helpful information.
- ▶ Focus on those things we can control.
- ▶ Take time to participate in activities that are restorative – rest, social support, meditation, exercise, nature.
- ▶ Ask, “Is this helpful?” Avoid those things that are not helpful, e.g., excessive news viewing after a natural disaster or violent event.
- ▶ Reframe distorted or black-and-white thinking, e.g., “The world is all bad” versus “Look how many people are helping today.”

Caring for Ongoing Needs

Supporting Adults and Staff

What to Expect

Common responses in adults:

- ▶ May avoid thoughts, feelings, or conversations associated with the trauma
- ▶ Might have an inability to recall important aspects of the trauma
- ▶ Might demonstrate a detachment from current events
- ▶ Might have difficulty sleeping, demonstrate sleep deprivation behavior (anxiety, irritability, outbursts, hypervigilance)

What to Do

- ▶ Recognize that staff may be struggling, too.
- ▶ Offer accurate and timely information as appropriate. Discourage gossip.
- ▶ During a crisis at the center, staff might need to temporarily set aside emotions to focus on the children. Articulate this.
- ▶ At the same time, encourage staff to communicate feelings of being overwhelmed or burnt out. Offer support and find solutions.
- ▶ Encourage self-care. Staff must meet their own needs if they are to support children and families.

Supporting Children

Depending on their age and maturity, children may not understand the nature of a crisis, but they're very in tune with adults' emotional reactions. They internalize our fear, anger, and sadness, but often lack the cognitive and verbal skills to process those emotions. As caregivers, we can give children the gift of a safe place during a crisis. Below are a few thoughts, some of which may be helpful for parents as well.

What to Expect

- ▶ Repetitive play may occur in which themes or aspects of the trauma are expressed.
- ▶ Children may have frightening dreams without recognizable content that they can articulate.
- ▶ Trauma-specific reenactments may occur.

What to Do

- ▶ It's OK to say to a child, "This makes me feel sad," but we should actually process our grief outside the classroom or clinic so we can be fully present for the children.
- ▶ Give children brief, simple explanations, emphasizing what you are doing to keep the child safe. Avoid media exposure.
- ▶ Maintain consistent routines and offer ample opportunities for play. This might mean changing your lesson plans – or scrapping them altogether. Focus on relationships and offer comfort. Offer outdoor time, dramatic play, sensory activities, art, and music. Read picture books that both empower and comfort children or spark play.
- ▶ Watch for misinterpretations. Children tend to view the world in black-and-white terms and may generalize a crisis, e.g., assuming that bad guys are coming to their school after hearing of a shooting elsewhere. Offer reassurance and clarity: "This was a terrible thing that happened and it makes me sad. It happened a long way from here and you are safe."

Conclusion

Handling grief and crisis is never easy for early childhood professionals. However, here are a few ideas that can help:

- ▶ Create a culture of trust and support before a situation occurs.
- ▶ Be prepared: Understand the dynamics of grief and know what to do in a crisis.

Resources

For an updated annotated list of resources and more information on helping children cope with tragedy, visit www.brighthorizons.com.

Disaster and Crisis

[American Academy of Pediatrics](#)

American Academy of Pediatrics is a comprehensive source for information related to helping children cope with disaster.

apa.org/helpcenter/

American Psychological Association offers numerous resources on a variety of topics.

<https://www.childtrauma.org/>

Information and resources to help improve the lives of traumatized and maltreated children.

www.ed.gov

The U.S. Department of Education has current information on education related topics.

<https://www.mercycorps.org/>

An international relief and development organization whose website provides information on programs all over the world and shows how to get help, give, share grief, and support children.

www.nami.org

The National Alliance on Mental Health has a wide variety of resources available for children and adults.

www.nationalcouncil.org

The National Council for Behavioral Health offers mental health support and resources.

www.nea.org

The National Education Association's [School Crisis Guide](#) is a substantive resource for dealing with school crisis.

www.redcross.org/

The American Red Cross provides emergency relief and immediate response to disasters. The website includes a wealth of suggested materials for children and caregivers regarding disasters, and avenues for volunteerism or assistance.

<https://njaes.rutgers.edu/FS702/>

Rutgers University provides suggestions on helping children recover from crisis or disaster.

<https://www.trynova.org/>

The National Organization for Victim Assistance provides resources and service information for victims of crimes and crises.

Children's Websites

www.noaa.gov

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration site where children can learn about and test their knowledge of natural disasters. Ages 8 and up

www.timeforkids.com

A current events online magazine that offers age-appropriate news coverage. Ages 6-12

Books for Adults

Emotional Recovery After Natural Disasters: How to Get Back to Normal Life by Ilana Singer. Practical information for victims of natural disasters and the people who work with them.

Children's Books

I Know What to Do: A Kid's Guide to Natural Disasters, Bonnie S. Mark, Aviva Layton and Michael Chesworth. Facts about disasters and information on how to prepare for and survive a disaster. Age 6 and up

River Friendly, River Wild, Jane Kurtz. Narrative poems about experiences during and after the Grand Forks, North Dakota floods. Helps children understand the impact of floods and the need for collaboration. Ages 7-10

The Magic School Bus: Inside a Hurricane (Magic School Bus Series), Joanna Cole and Bruce Degen. Children look inside the eye of a hurricane. Ages 4-8

On Weather

<https://www.educationworld.com/>

A great site for caregivers with ideas and classroom activities in response to current events such as natural disasters.

Children's Websites

www.nationalgeographic.com/ngkids/

An interactive website where children can explore the world of nature, animals, history, space, and science. Ages 6-13

www.noaa.gov

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration site where children can learn about and test their knowledge of natural disasters. Ages 8 and up

www.climatekids.nasa.gov

Engaging, age-appropriate information on weather and climate change. Ages 8 and up.

Children's Books

Down Comes the Rain by Franklyn M. Branley. A concise, easy to read look at the water cycle, how water is recycled, clouds are formed, and why we have rain and hail. Grades 2-4

Flash, Crash, Rumble and Roll by Franklyn Branley. Facts about weather and the causes of storms and a few simple experiments about weather. Grades K-4

Hurricane by Gail Gibbons

On Children and Stress

Harvard University Center on the Developing Child: [Toxic Stress](#)

The Mayo Clinic: [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder \(PTSD\)](#)

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: [Types of Trauma](#)

On Grief and Loss

www.childtrauma.org

Provides information and resources to help improve the lives of traumatized and maltreated children.

<https://www.dougy.org/>

The Dougy Center, the National Center for Grieving Children and Families, provides support and training nationally and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children in grief.

Books for Adults

Parenting through Crisis: Helping Kids in Times of Loss, Grief and Change by Barbara Coloroso. Suggestions to help parents support children through difficult times.

Children's Books

Books for Children Preschool - Age 8:

The Invisible String, by Patrice Karst, is a beautiful, simple story in which a mother gives her young children the message that "people who love each other are always connected by a very special string made of love." This book explores separation as a universal theme. Use it to help children understand all types of separation, from going to school to going to bed to the death of a loved one.

Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs, by Tomie dePaola, recounts de Paola's childhood experience of his grandmother's death. The book addresses the subject in simple terms (ie. explains the term "died" as meaning someone won't be there anymore), and shows the process of a child struggling to understand what it means to lose someone he loves.

When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death, by Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Brown, explains in simple language the feelings people may have regarding the death of a loved one and offers suggestions to honor the memory of someone who has died. This book has a simple glossary of words with easily understandable definitions.

The Fall of Freddie the Leaf: A Story of Life for All Ages, by Leo Buscaglia, Ph.D., touches children and adults alike, illustrating the delicate balance between life and death as Freddie the Leaf changes with the passing seasons and the coming of winter.

Badger's Parting Gifts, by Susan Varley. Badger's friends are sad when Badger dies. They realize though that he lives on through their memories of his kindness and goodness. By the spring, Badger's friends are beginning to heal.

The Tenth Good Thing About Barney, by Judith Viorst. My cat Barney died this Friday. I was very sad. My mother said we could have a funeral for him, and I should think of ten good things about Barney so I could tell them... A small boy loved his cat Barney and can only think of nine good things. With his father's help, he discovers the tenth good thing and begins to understand about the cycle of life and coping with loss.

Lifetimes, by Michael Mellonie. A beautifully illustrated book to help a child see that death is a part of life.

I'll Always Love You, by Hans Wilhelm. In this gentle, moving story, a boy and Elfie, his dachshund, grow up happily together. When Elfie dies, the boy copes by saying, "I love you," to Elfie each night as he goes to sleep.

After the Funeral by Jane Loretta Winsch. This book can help children and their families move forward towards acceptance, understanding, and hope. It discusses the different feelings that accompany the death of a loved one, including sadness, grief, and the fear of death itself.

I Miss You: A First Look at Death by Pat Thomas. A book about feelings that invites children to tell how they are feeling.

Sophie by Mem Fox, poignantly tells the story of Sophie and her beloved grandfather. As Sophie grows taller, Grandpa grows smaller. Then there is no Grandpa. The story culminates with the birth of Sophie's own child, illustrating the cycle of life.

The Saddest Time by Norma Simon. Three short stories about the death of an uncle, a school friend and a grandmother explain death as the inevitable end of life.

When a Pet Dies by Fred Rogers. In his gentle tone, Mr. Rogers helps children understand and cope with the death of a favorite pet.

Books for Children Ages 6 - 9:

Help Me Say Goodbye: Activities for Helping Kids Cope When a Special Person Dies by Janis Silverman. An art therapy and activity book for children coping with the death of someone they love. Sensitive exercises address the questions children may have during this emotional crisis. Children are encouraged to express in pictures what they are often incapable of expressing in words.

Rudi's Pond by Eve Bunting. Based on a true story, Rudi's Pond recounts a young girl's friendship with a terminally ill boy. When Rudi dies, she and her classmates struggle to accept his death. Ultimately, they find joy by building a pond and hummingbird feeder in his memory.

The Memory String by Eve Bunting. Laura's memory string holds buttons: buttons from her mother's prom dress, wedding dress, and the nightgown she was wearing when she died. When the string breaks, Laura's stepmother, Jane, helps her search for a missing button. This beautifully illustrated story explores the process of celebrating the past, while accepting the present and future.

The Purple Balloon by Chris Raschka. A gentle, reassuring book for seriously ill children and the people who love and care for them.

Books for Children Ages 6 - 12:

I Wish I Could Hold Your Hand: A Child's Guide to Grief and Loss by Dr. Pat Palmer. This warm, comforting book gently helps grieving children identify their feelings and learn to accept and deal with them, discovering that it is normal and natural to feel the pain of loss.

Michael Rosen's Sad Book by Michael Rosen and Quentin Blake. This is a very sad, moving account of the author's grief over the loss of his mother and son. The book takes an unflinching look at the overwhelming sadness and despair that can follow loss, but it also gives insight into the sparks of joy and optimism that memories can bring.

On Homelessness

www.endhomelessness.org

The National Alliance to End Homelessness is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to mobilize the nonprofit, public, and private sectors of society in an alliance to end homelessness.

www.homesforthehomeless.com

The Institute for Children and Poverty evaluates strategies and offers innovative approaches to combat the effects of homelessness.

www.horizonsforhomelesschildren.org

Horizons for Homeless Children is a Massachusetts-based organization that works to improve the lives of homeless children and their families.

<https://naehcy.org/www.naehcy.org>

National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth serves as the voice for the education of homeless children, connecting educators, parents, advocates, and service providers, to ensure school success.

<https://nationalhomeless.org/>

The National Coalition for the Homeless works to end homelessness through grassroots organizing, education, advocacy, technical assistance, and partnerships.

<https://serve.uncg.edu/>

The National Center for Homeless Education provides research, resources, and information enabling communities to address the educational needs of children and youth experiencing homelessness.

Children's Books

A Shelter in our Car by Maria Teste, Karen Ritz (Illustrator). Eight-year-old Zettie and her mother left Jamaica in search of education and a better life in America, and now live in an old car. The story shows how family love thrives, regardless of where you live. Pre-k - Grade 2

Changing Places: A Kid's View of Shelter Living by Margie Chalofsky, Glen Finland, Judy Wallace, Ingrid Klass (Illustrator). A poignant view of shelter life for children. Ages 6-13

Cooper's Tale by Ralph Da Costa Nunez, Madeline Simon (Illustrator). Cooper the mouse becomes homeless and develops a friendship with three homeless children that change all their lives.

Preschool

Home Is Where We Live: Life at a Shelter Through a Young Girl's Eyes by Jane Hertensten, Editor, B.L. Groth, Photographer. Life in a shelter through the eyes of a ten-year-old girl that demystifies the experience and casts as positive a light as possible on the experience. Grades 3-5

Lives Turned Upside Down by J. Hubbard. Homeless children document their lives through photographs. Grades 2 and up

No Place to Be: Voices of Homeless Children by Judith Berek. Interviews with 30 homeless children ages 8 through 18. Grade 5 and up

Our Wish by Ralph Da Costa Nunez, Jenna Mandel, Madeline Gerstein (Illustrator). After their home is destroyed, Mrs. Bun E. Rabbit and her children find themselves in need of a helping hand. Grades K-2

Sailey's Journey by Ralph Da Costa Nunez, Katrina Kwok (Illustrator). After losing his shell in a storm, Sailey the Snail joins his friends to set off on a journey to find a new home. Preschool

Someplace to Go by Ann Mc Govern, Marty Backer (Illustrator). Davey is living in a shelter and eating in a soup kitchen. The book captures his loneliness and despair, as well as hope and the happiness he feels at the end of the day when he comes home to his Mother and brother – even if it is at a shelter. Grades K-5

On Tolerance and Bias

www.adl.org

A World of Difference Web site that offers a comprehensive annotated bibliography of multi-cultural and anti-bias books for children.

www.tolerance.org

Tolerance.org is a Web project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, a nonprofit civil rights organization that promotes tolerance and diversity and combats hate and discrimination through education, inquiry, and litigation. Site features sections for caregivers, parents, teens and elementary age children.

Websites for Children

www.peacecorps.gov/kids

Children's site sponsored by the Peace Corps. A good resource for information about cultures around the world and how to make a difference. Ages 7-13

Books for Adults

Caring and Capable Kids by Linda Williams. An activity book filled with stories, songs and worksheets to help children develop empathy and compassion, and learn to exercise sound judgment. Grades K-8

The Affective Curriculum, Teaching the Anti-bias Approach to Young Children by Nadia Saderman and Valerie Rhomberg. Both a theoretical and practical approach that helps caregivers develop skills to foster anti-bias attitudes in children. It includes activities for infants, toddlers, preschool and school age children, international resources and a dictionary of useful terms translated into 20 languages.

Teaching Your Child to Resist Bias; brochure from NAEYC. (available at 800-424-2460 or www.naeyc.org).

Anti Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children by Louise Derman Sparks.

Roots and Wings: Affirming Culture in Early Childhood Programs, Stacey York.

Working with Children from Culturally Diverse Backgrounds, Diane Klien and Deborah Chen.

Children's Books

Black, White, Just Right, Marguerite W. Davol, Irene Trivas (Illustrator). A playful picture book in which a mixed race child talks about the rich differences in her family – but they're all "just right." Preschool

Erik is Homeless, Keith Elliot Greenberg. A photo essay and story of hope about Erik's life in shelters and at welfare hotels. Ages 5-9

Fly Away Home, Eve Bunting. A picture book about the lives of a boy and his father who live at the airport. Ages 4-8

Let's Talk About Race, Lester Julius, Karen Barbour (Illustrator). The author introduces the concept of race as only one component of a person's or nation's story. Grades 1-5

What Happened to MY World? Helping Children Cope with Natural Disaster and Catastrophe is a resource for parents, caregivers, and anyone working with children.

What Happened to MY World was written to help adults peer into the minds of children from infancy through the teenage years, and understand their confusion, fears, grief, and struggles to understand why the forces of nature can suddenly disrupt or destroy the world as they know it. It is to help both those who experience and survive catastrophe firsthand, as well as the children who witness from a distance and wonder what it was like or whether someday they will find themselves in similar circumstances.

Extraordinary events like these test us all as citizens and human beings sharing a planet. They test us as parents, both as guardians of our children trying to keep them emotionally safe, and as our children's caregivers trying to raise them to become enlightened and empathetic adults. Children grow into the kind of people they will become at least in part by how we guide them through their questions, concerns, and fears, and whether we use the teachable moments thrust upon us to provide them with support, care, and guidance.

About the author

The late Jim Greenman was Senior Vice President for Education and Program Development at Bright Horizons Family Solutions, the world's leading provider of employer-sponsored early care and education. He is the author of *What Happened to the World: Helping Children Cope with Turbulent Times* and numerous other books and articles.



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