

When Disaster Strikes: Supporting Emotional Development and Helping Children Cope **NAEYC Annual Conference – November 22, 2019**

Natural disasters are increasing in severity and impact. Children have unique needs when they do, and early childhood programs can and should help meet them. Well-chosen, supportive language is a great strategy to implement because it can be used anywhere! Here are some ideas to get you started.

Planning Ahead:

- ✓ Plan short and long-term responses at the classroom level and the program level.
- ✓ Integrate professional development experiences to include aspects of curriculum that help children and adults reduce and manage stress.
- ✓ Build strong communication systems with families and between teachers and administrators.
 - *To a parent: "I can understand why you would be concerned. Our emergency procedures are on our website – I can email you a link. In case of an emergency, we will send out an automated call and post an update on our school Facebook page, so you know what is happening with your child."*
- ✓ Practice the plans you have in place for emergencies and expand considerations of evacuation and emergency response plans.
 - *To a child: "This is where we will go if our classroom isn't a safe place. This place is safe!"*

Short Term Strategies:

- ✓ Empower children to set the tone for the classroom and guide the conversation.
 - *To a child: "I wonder if you're feeling nervous today. Would you like to tell me about it, or would you like me to just hold you until you feel better?"*
- ✓ Emphasize soothing activities to reduce stress hormones, adjusting curriculum until things return to normal.
 - Soothing, regulating activities like water play, play dough, and gross motor activities can help children manage their emotions during stressful times.
 - *To a child: "Today the weather is beautiful! We will have extra time outside this morning."*
- ✓ Expect and accommodate regression and increased emotionality.
 - *To a child: "You have a pacifier in your cubby – it might help you feel ready for a nap today. Would you like to try it?"*

Long Term Strategies:

- ✓ Add age-appropriate learning activities about causes and impacts of natural disasters.
 - *To a child: "Hurricanes are so big, scientist can see them from space! We can watch where they are going so we know how to stay safe when they come."*
- ✓ Emphasize ongoing relationship-building activities for children, families, and teachers.
 - *To a child: "Yes, I can watch you play! I see lots of firefighters in the block area today!"*
- ✓ Plan in advance for your own self-care and encourage others to do so as well.
 - *Examples: Attend to basic needs like sleep and good nutrition, build in breaks to regroup and manage unexpected tasks, streamline daily routines during initial response phase*
- ✓ Attending to adult emotional and mental well-being benefits children and is essential for long-term recovery.

Collaborating with Families:

- ✓ Develop strategies and communication tools to recognize and accommodate families in crisis.
 - *To a child: "I know it's hard when you don't get to sleep in your own room. We can keep your special things in your cubby at school until your house is ready for you."*
 - *To a parent: "Natural disasters are stressful for everyone. How can we support you here at school?"*
- ✓ Create and regularly update a data base of community resources.
- ✓ Lean on routines to help children, families, and teachers know what is happening.
 - *To a child: "First circle time, then outside time, then lunch, then nap. When you wake up it will be time to get ready for Grandma to pick you up!"*
 - *To a parent: "There is schedule for this week in your child's backpack, and on our Facebook page. I know it's hard to keep track of everything under the circumstances!"*

The good news is research indicates that most children will recover from the emotional impact of natural disasters, when they are physically safe and their emotional needs are met. Teachers can play an important role in the recovery process!

Download this handout and our *Resource and Reference List* at www.innovationsinece.com.

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