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How to Help Your Children Cope After Hurricane Harvey



Tara Haelle, Contributor

I offer straight talk on science, medicine, health and vaccines. Opinions expressed by Forbes Contributors are their own.

See [this post for children's book recommendations](#) that can help children understand natural disasters and help them heal and cope.

I was teaching high school in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex in 2005 when Hurricane Katrina hit, and we had the same influx of displaced families that the rest of Texas did. I therefore saw first-hand the immediate and long-term effects of the [trauma](#) our students experienced. Dealing with natural disasters is difficult for anyone, but children and teens often have fewer resources than adults to manage their response and less power to take action and keep themselves busy.

Two things are vital for parents to keep in mind at this time: 1) Parents absolutely [must take care of themselves](#) so they are able to give their children what they need, and 2) Children (and parents) will take a long time to mentally and emotionally recover from this disaster, and everyone needs to be able to express and cope with their stress in different, non-destructive ways.



People make their way out of a flooded neighborhood after it was inundated with rain water following Hurricane Harvey on August 29, 2017 in Houston, Texas. Harvey, which made landfall north of Corpus Christi August 25, has dumped nearly 50 inches of rain in and around Houston.

(Photo by Scott Olson/Getty Images)

“During any disaster, children are uniquely vulnerable—both to the physical threats of the storm and flooding, as well as to the long-term psychological impacts from enduring a traumatizing event,” said Fernando Stein, MD, a Houston-based pediatrician and president of the American Academy of Pediatrics, in an [official statement](#) from the AAP.

“Children fare best when they are surrounded by loving, nurturing adults, so it's critical that families remain together during rescue and recovery efforts,” Stein said, adding that staying together is critical for immigrant families as well. “We must reassure immigrant communities that our first concern is for their safety and well-being,” he said.

Here are some tips on how to help your children deal with their experience and your family's current circumstances:

- **Reassure your children that you love them, that all of you will be okay** and that they can talk to you about anything worrying or upsetting them. Open communication is crucial. If children suspect their questions or comments upset you, they may shut down, making recovery more difficult later on.
- **Watch for (or even expect) common symptoms of severe stress** in your children, including difficulty sleeping, sleeping more than usual, nightmares, changes in appetite, irritability, acting out, withdrawing from others, obsessiveness, new hyperactivity and persistent crying. Recognize that your child cannot control those responses and monitor their symptoms so you can tell if they are worsening or improving.
- **Talk to your child** about what happened and/or what is happening. “Silence suggests that what has occurred is too horrible to even speak of,” the [AAP notes](#). Children see and hear more than adults realize, so your child may understand more than you expect.
- **Ask your child** to describe what they have experienced or understand and correct any misinformation they have. Listen to them carefully, and address their fears directly and honestly. Let them know they can ask you any question, and keep communication going.
- Your child may need to **ask the same question or tell you the same story over and over again** — let them. When you answer their questions, adjust the amount of detail to what is age-appropriate and appropriate for your particular child.
- Using electronics such as tablets or smartphones is fine if they are available, but **avoid television coverage of the disaster** as much as possible, even for yourself. Plenty of research has shown that TV coverage of disasters can reinforce the trauma, especially for children but also for adults.
- Recognize that **each person handles traumatic experiences differently**. Your child may seem shell-shocked, morbidly curious, or completely uninterested. All of these can be normal reactions. **No feeling is “wrong,”** and your children should know that too.
- Continually **reassure your children** that many people are working together to help your family, their friends' families and others in the community and to keep everyone as safe as possible.
- Remember that **your child is watching you** to see how you react and respond to the situation. “This is an opportunity for you to role model how to cope and how to plan for the future,” the AAP notes.

The tips above are drawn largely [from the AAP](#), which also provides thorough information on [what to do before, during and after flooding](#). Here are additional resources:

- [Talking to Children about Disasters from the AAP](#)
- [An in-depth guide on talking with youth and helping them cope after a disaster or traumatic event](#), from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
- Detailed, well-laid-out information on helping [young children](#), [school-age children](#), and [teens](#) after a disaster, and helping [young children](#), [school-age children](#), and [teens](#) with traumatic grief, from The National Child Traumatic Stress Network
- [What parents should know about floods](#) and [hurricanes](#) their impact on youth
- [Understanding Child Traumatic Stress](#) for parents

- [Tips for Parents on Media Coverage](#) (written originally for violent events at a school but applicable to other traumatic events)
- [Tips to Help Children Cope With Disasters](#) from the National Association for the Education of Young Children

In addition, though it may not be possible to access new books just yet, check out [these book recommendations](#) for picture books specifically aimed at helping younger children understand and cope with their experience.

My book, [The Informed Parent](#), with co-author [Emily Willingham](#), is [now available](#). Find me on [Twitter here](#).