

## BUILD RESILIENCE

**R**esilience is the ability to cope with stress, bounce back from difficult times, and adapt well to trying situations. It is always a good idea to work on fostering resilience in your family, as it will prepare your children to deal with day-to-day stressors, as well as disaster situations.

### How do we build resilience?

Parents should focus on the development of the following skills to help build and maintain resilience in children:

#### Social skills/relationship building

It is important for children to learn how to form positive and healthy relationships with both adults and other children. Receiving social support from others is very helpful during tough times.

#### Effective and assertive communication

Children need to learn how to make their wants and needs known in an appropriate manner. Children who do not learn how to communicate in an assertive manner often either communicate through aggression or become very passive.

- Emotional expression and regulation Learning how to express emotions and regulate (control) them is essential for children. Otherwise, children can become overwhelmed, confused and sometimes aggressive.

- Empathy, caring and reaching out

Empathy, the ability to put oneself in someone else's shoes and feel what they feel, is a particularly important emotional skill for children to develop. Supporting another with similar experiences can be healing for both the giver and the receiver.

- Problem solving

Children need to learn to think, plan and problem-solve in an organized and clear manner. This builds independence, self-competence and increased overall ability.

#### Characteristics of families that build resilience include:

- Parents who show an interest in their children's lives and who involve themselves in their children's activities
- Stable and consistent home routines (for instance, regular family time, chores that each family member is expected to complete, family outings)
- Open family communication
- Parents who emphasize to their children the importance of doing well in school

FROM THE INTERNATIONAL CENTER TO HEAL OUR CHILDREN  
CHILDREN'S NATIONAL MEDICAL CENTER

# Preparing Your Family for Disasters



Whether it is a hurricane, terrorist attack, or some other traumatic event that threatens your family, there are important basic ways to prepare your family. Being prepared lessens the negative impact of an event on your family and will help you and your children to be more resilient.



Children's National

<sup>TM</sup>

Health System

Children's National Health System  
111 Michigan Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20010-2970  
Phone: 202-884-2800  
Fax: 202-884-5685

[www.childrensnational.com](http://www.childrensnational.com)

## EDUCATE YOURSELF

### Know where to go for information.

In the aftermath of a disaster, the public's need for immediate information can lead to the circulation of rumors and false information. Even reputable media sources may broadcast unsubstantiated information in their hurry to weigh-in on a dramatic situation. To avoid confusion that will make you and your children anxious, find a reliable source of information. Plan ahead to know where your family will get updates and instructions. Federal agencies, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, are excellent information sources. You may also contact your local health department or hospital, or your child's pediatrician for information.

**Lock-Down** When entrances and exits to a building are in effect sealed to protect individuals in the building from a dangerous situation. Depending on the event, a lock-down could last for days. An office, school or even hospital can go into lock-down.

**Personal Protective Gear** Items worn to protect individuals

from disease or hazardous substances. Face masks and full body suits, called "Hazmat Suits," are examples. Young children may find these suits frightening, and may not understand what a healthcare provider is saying if the provider is wearing a respirator.

### Know your children's normal responses to stress.

Differentiating between an emotional response to a disaster and actual exposure to a hazardous substance can be difficult, as the symptoms of stress, such as headaches or nausea, can sometimes be similar. Normal reactions include:

- Non-specific physical complaints (aches and pains)
- Sensitivity to loud noises
- Eating problems
- Sleep changes (trouble falling asleep, bad dreams)
- Poor concentration
- Confusion and irritability

If your child's symptoms persist, or you think that your child may have been exposed to a hazardous substance, call your pediatrician.

### Know the terminology.

Familiarize yourself with disaster terminology because what is being said. In the middle of a crisis, unfamiliar technical words can be confusing and anxiety provoking. Some useful definitions include:

**Decontamination.** The process of eliminating poisonous or otherwise harmful substances, such as noxious chemicals or radioactive material. Decontamination often involves specially constructed showers in which individuals can wash off dangerous substances with water and soap. If your child must go through decontamination, you may not be able to be present during that time to avoid exposing you to the toxic material. Every effort will be made to reunite you with your child as quickly as possible.

**Quarantine.** Enforced isolation or the restriction of free movement imposed to prevent the spread of contamination. Quarantine can be very traumatic if children and parents are separated. Authorities will make every effort to keep children and parents together and to provide methods of communication when necessary.

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### Know how to take care of yourself.

The better you cope during a traumatic event, the better your children will cope. Take care of yourself by:

- Setting realistic goals for what you can accomplish each day
- Taking care of yourself: eat right, rest and exercise
- Nurturing yourself: do not stop enjoying family and friends
- Celebrating small successes
- Staying flexible and having an open mind to new ideas
- Seeking help if feeling overwhelmed

## EDUCATE YOUR CHILDREN

Provide children with the basic, accurate information that they need, depending on the event. Use your judgment and your knowledge of your children as you decide what you will tell them. Avoid details, as they will likely be upsetting. It is very important to explain the events in words that a child can understand. Be available and let your children ask questions. Know that you may need to repeat information that is difficult to understand. Respect your child's feelings, thoughts and reactions, even if they appear different from your own.

## MAKE A PLAN

A disaster plan will not only prepare your family with the logistical considerations needed in the event of an emergency, but will also give your children a sense of mastery over the threatening danger and help ease fears.

- Make sure all children have parents' work phone numbers and cell phone numbers
- Agree upon a meeting place in case you and your child separate
- Make sure your child knows how to contact EMS and dial 9-1-1
- Make sure your child's school has your contact information, other emergency contact numbers, information about your meeting place, and the pediatrician's number

It is also an excellent idea to think about the individuals who form your personal support network and consider how you would reach out to them. Having these contacts in place can help to reduce your anxiety if, for example, you find yourself in a lock-down situation at your work place. Identify people you can rely on to:

- Get a message to family and friends
- Watch your children
- Take care of your house
- Take care of your pets
- Talk to about what you have experienced

After traumatic events, you and your family may benefit from the support of a mental health professional. Contact your pediatrician, a school-based mental health clinician or the National Mental Health Association for information about services in your community.

