

Activities for Children to Promote Recovery from Disasters

By Samantha Miller, American Red Cross

Following a disaster, parents have many things on their mind. In the chaos, children can be overlooked and left to entertain themselves. However, it is during this time that children can give insight into how they are coping with the trauma, and parents can play a large role in helping to shape their child's recovery.

Unfortunately, parents – who are already emotionally and creatively drained – are unsure of even how to begin. These are a few fun activities to do with children to promote emotional recovery and foster lifelong resiliency.

Activities

Disasters often leave children feeling powerless. Engaging them in activities that help give back to their community helps them to regain a sense of power and belonging. These activities can be done in small or large groups, and with the support of other community members who could help to pass along a skill.

- Making tie blankets for others.
- Knitting scarves, or hats, depending on the weather.
- Making a meal for the neighborhood.
- Creating survival bracelets, made from simple string that can be braided into a bracelet, promoting unity and community or family strength.

■ Age appropriate construction work (with adult supervision). This may include something as advanced as helping to rebuild a neighbor's home, or as simple as building and decorating a bird house.

Promoting Conversation

Like adults, children also need to talk with others about how they are feeling and the difficulties they may have following the disaster. This can be therapeutic for both children and adults, helping the child reconnect with their caregiver, and helping the caregiver understand the emotional status of the child.

- Going for a walk.
- Having your child picture his or her favorite spot and describe it to you.
- Drawing or painting with your child.
- Create a feeling wheel. This is created by using a paper plate and labeling colored sections with different feelings. By putting a movable arrow in the middle, children can indicate how they are feeling without having to verbalize it. This can be especially helpful for a child who does not want to talk following the incident.

■ Create a memorial to what was lost. This may include everything from loved ones, toys, pets, or feelings. This activity allows children to validate their feeling and grieve for their loss.

When talking with children it may be helpful to allow them to hold or manipulate something such as play dough, a beaded necklace, or a breathing ball. This gives their hands something to do, as they talk about the experience and find the right words to describe their feelings.

Unstructured play items

Children may react differently to disasters depending on many

factors, such as age, level of understanding, temperament, culture, type or frequency of the disaster, and others. However, all children play, and toys can be used to help a child understand and cope with the trauma they have just experienced. These toys do not dictate how a child can or should play, and they allow the child to project their feelings or thoughts into the play activity, giving parents an inside look into their child's mind.

- Play dough.
- Lego's.
- Blocks.
- Drawing or painting.
- Journaling.
- Made-up games. These may be games that a child makes ups. For example, in a game called "Tornado," a child will build a block city, then pretend to be the tornado, running through and destroying the city.

Caregivers should remember that the toy alone is not what will help a child recover, but can be used as a tool or medium through which children can express themselves and understand what they have just experienced. Playing with the child also can be a good way to spark a discussion with the child. Activities can be used as quality time, that may have been disrupted or eliminated from the family's normal schedule due to the disaster.

Books:

- *The Two Bobbies*, by Kirby Larson, Mary Nethery, & Jean Cassels.
- *Wemberly Worried*, by Kevin Henkes.

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■ *Is a Worry Worrying You?* by Ferida Wolff, Harriet May Savitz and Marie LeTourneau.

■ *The Invisible String*, by Patrice Karst.

■ *Firebird*, by Brent McCorkle and Amy Parker.

Professional Help

Caregivers also should realize that professional help is available and can be a great asset to children recovering from a disaster. The activities listed in this article should not be used as a substitution for professional intervention, and should not be seen as a cure-all for emotional

trauma following a disaster.

Individual experiences and circumstances can vary greatly, and caregivers should pay close attention to changes in their child's behavior or attitude. Children often use caregivers for clues on how to respond to new or stressful situations, so caregivers themselves should remember the importance of self-care and when to seek help.

More Resources

For more resources about available professional help following a disaster, check out:

- [The American Red Cross](#).
- [Lutheran Social Services: Camp Noah](#).
- [Save the Children](#).



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