

Emotional and Behavioral Reactions of Children to Disasters

Pre-School: Ages 1 – 5

Children this age are particularly vulnerable to changes in routine.

They lack the ability to verbalize their feelings and the conceptual skills to cope with sudden stress.

They are affected by the reactions of family members and school personnel.

Some of the common emotional and behavioral reactions to a natural disaster:

- ◆ Denial of event, no reaction whatsoever
- ◆ Nervousness
- ◆ Irritability
- ◆ Disobedience
- ◆ Hyperactivity
- ◆ Tics
- ◆ Speech difficulties
- ◆ Anxiety about any separation from parents
- ◆ Shorter attention span
- ◆ Aggressive behavior
- ◆ Sudden burst of tears

Early Childhood: Ages 5 – 11

Regressive behaviors are especially common

Children may become withdrawn and/or more aggressive

They may be particularly affected by loss of prized objects or pets

Some of the common emotional and behavioral reactions include:

- ◆ School phobia
- ◆ Withdrawal from friends
- ◆ Hyperactivity
- ◆ Irritability
- ◆ Disobedience
- ◆ Inability to concentrate
- ◆ Repetitive talking about their experience
- ◆ Aggressive behavior

Emotional and Behavioral Reactions of Children to Disasters Continued

Preadolescent: Ages 11 – 14

Peer reactions are very important to this group

They need to know their feelings are typical

Survivor's guilt might emerge in this age group

Group discussion can be effective in reducing the sense of isolation

Some of the common emotional and behavioral reactions include:

- ◆ Disruptive behavior
- ◆ Sadness or depression
- ◆ Resistance to authority
- ◆ Loss of interest in hobbies and peer activities
- ◆ Inability to concentrate

Adolescent: Ages 14 – 18

Extreme fear that their reaction might differ from the peer group

May be frustrated by lack of adult responsibilities

Some of the common emotional and behavioral reactions include:

- ◆ Marked increase or decrease in physical activity level
- ◆ Expression of feelings of inadequacy and helplessness
- ◆ Delinquent behavior
- ◆ Depression
- ◆ Increased difficulty in concentration
- ◆ Extreme mood swings