

# Helping Children Understand Natural Disasters

In light of recent world events and events that continue to affect our children here at home, Sesame Street along with the American Red Cross are offering parents, caregivers and other adults, these tips on how to help children understand and cope with the effects of natural disasters.

## Encourage children to ask questions

Their questions will help you understand what they already know about the situation and allow you to give child-friendly answers to those specific questions. If a question catches you off guard, take a moment to think about how you want to respond before answering. It's also okay to say, "I don't know." Make it clear that you're open to talking about whatever they bring up.

**Give children the facts.** Use simple words to explain what has happened. In the case of an earthquake, you can explain that "When there's an earthquake, the ground shakes. It shakes because rocks deep under the ground are moving." Explain that it can be scary for everyone, but that adults do their best to keep children safe.

**Respect children's concerns.** If children tell you that they are afraid of something, validate their fears. Let them know it's okay to be afraid or concerned.

**Offer comfort.** Children often take their cues from you; when you react, they react. Try to model a sense of calm. Answer even repeated questions honestly and simply. Reassure children that they are safe with you, and that you love them and will take care of them.

**Monitor media use.** Avoid having children watch or see repeated images of troubling events, such as a natural disaster and its damage. Younger children might think that the event is happening over and over. Parents or caregivers may also want to limit their exposure to media as one way to reduce their own anxiety.

**Children may express feelings through actions rather than words.** Watch for ongoing changes in behavior in the aftermath of a natural disaster. Children may exhibit clinginess, over activity, not wanting to participate in routines like going to school, etc.

**Empower children by thinking about ways you can help.** Put together a lemonade stand or a bake sale in your community or school to donate the proceeds to organizations providing aid to the affected areas. Helping others will not only help children learn about empathy, it also shows that there are people that will be there to help during tough times.



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## What to say when children say, "I'm scared!"

### 2 YEARS OLD OR YOUNGER:

Let children know it's okay to feel scared. Even more than words, young children need tangible reassurance. Try providing children with a comfort item to hold on to, and keep them close at hand. Lots of hugs help, too!

### 3 TO 5:

"It's OK to feel scared. Can you tell Mommy why you're scared? Mommy loves you, and I will be here to keep you safe."

### 6 TO 11:

Start by asking children what they already know about what has happened and how they are feeling, so you know how to address their particular concerns. Reassure them that it's okay to be scared, but that they are safe and will be cared for.

If children continue to be very upset by what happened or if reactions interfere with school work or relationships at home or with friends, it may be appropriate to talk with their primary care physician, a mental health provider or other health care professional who specializes in children's needs.



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