



Tips for Tots



Tip: Special Topics

Supporting Infants/Toddlers in the Aftermath of Sandy

Strategies

Did you know?

Infant/Toddler:

The aftermath of a major storm such as Sandy can profoundly impact young children and leave them feeling scared, upset and insecure. It is normal for children to react to an event like a hurricane and to interpret it as a personal threat. A child's reaction will vary depending on several factors, i.e. the degree and type of exposure, age/development, previous experiences with any perceived/real threats, etc. Reactions can include behaviors such as withdrawal, tantrums, crying, and clinginess, changes in sleep or appetite, and regression.

Major disruptions often occur not only within their homes and families, but also with their childcare settings, caregivers and peer groups. As a result the things that keep children feeling safe such as, routines, familiarity, and emotional availability of caregivers are compromised. How families and caregivers react to traumatic events and their response to the needs of children in their care will directly impact a child's social emotional wellbeing. While resources are likely to be very limited, it is essential to respond during the storm's aftermath in ways that help children feel safe and by doing so, minimize any further distress.

Infant/Toddler:

- While infants and toddlers may not understand a major event has just happened, they often sense this from their environment and caregivers. They will experience strong feelings in their bodies (i.e. tension, pounding heart) and will need a caregiver's support in order to soothe. Because children respond so strongly to the emotions of others, caregivers need to reduce their own stress so they can be a calm soothing presence for children. Provide calm music, hold/comfort the child, and offer verbal reassurance.
- Limit any changes to the child's classroom/ peer group or caregivers. If a change of location is necessary, try to bring familiar items from the classroom (i.e. favorite toys, pictures). Create a **comfort bag/box** this can help children transition to new environments. Be sure to familiarize infants and toddlers with any new caregiver; do this while a familiar adult is present.
- Try to maintain classroom routines. Routines give children a sense of security. They help children understand what will happen next and will reorganize them after the chaos of a major storm.
- You may notice an increase in clinginess and startled responses, or that new fears have developed. There may be changes in a child's appetite or sleep patterns. Be patient. Know these are typical following a scary event and should decrease over time. Continue to provide reassurance and extra support. Communicate about these regularly with the child's parent, while offering them reassurance and ways they can support their child.
- Children may have more challenging behaviors such as hitting, biting, or refusing to follow rules. Use positive guidance strategies to provide support and redirection for these behaviors.
- Separations, especially from parents, may be more stressful. Support parents in developing a good- bye ritual or ask them to leave a comfort item with the child, such as a parent's sweater, glove, or a child's favorite toy. Remind the child when the parent will pick them up, i.e. after snack time.
- While children are not at risk of danger, certain objects or activities may cause them to feel this way. Observe children to learn what these triggers may be and try to avoid them. Offer reassurance by reminding them of familiar items or events (that appear to be a trigger) and show them how they work and/or explain what happened in a way they can understand.

Resources:

- Save the Children <http://www.savethechildren.org>
- FEMA <http://www.fema.gov/kids/teacher.htm>
- Sesame Street <http://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/topicsandactivities/toolkits/ready>

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