

# Evaluate children's stress after natural disasters

August 28 2012

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As Hurricane Isaac nears the Gulf Coast, one may wonder what the impact of natural disasters are on children. Who is most at risk for persistent stress reactions? How can such youth be identified and assisted in the aftermath of a destructive storm?

Dr. Annette M. La Greca, a professor of psychology and pediatrics at the University of Miami, and her colleagues, have been studying children's disaster reactions following Hurricanes Andrew (1992), Charley (2004) and Ike (2008). Recent findings from Hurricane Ike shed light on these questions about children's functioning.

The new findings suggest that it is important to evaluate children's symptoms of post-traumatic stress and depression, in order to identify those who may be the most adversely affected. Findings also suggest that helping children cope with [stressors](#) that occur during or after the disaster may improve children's psychological functioning. "Children may have to move or change schools. Their neighborhood may not be safe for [outdoor play](#) and they may not be able to spend time with their friends. Children need help coping with these and other post-disaster stressors," La Greca says.

In collaboration with Scott and Elaine Sevin, Dr. La Greca developed a workbook for parents to help their children cope with the many stressors that occur after disasters. The book gives parents tips for helping children stay healthy and fit, maintain normal routines, and cope with stressors and with emotions, such as fears and worries. The After the

Storm workbook is available at no cost at [www.7-dippity.com](http://www.7-dippity.com).

A paper to be published in the [Journal of Affective Disorders](#) indicates that, eight months after the disaster, children with signs of both post-traumatic stress and depression represent a high-risk group for longer-term adverse reactions. Such children are less likely to recover by 15 months post-disaster than other youth. They also report more severe levels of [psychological symptoms](#) and experience more post-disaster stressors than other youth. The authors on this paper are Drs. Betty Lai and Annette La Greca from the University of Miami, Dr. Beth Auslander from the University of Texas Medical Branch, and Dr. Mary Short from the University of Houston-Clear Lake.

Provided by University of Miami

Citation: Evaluate children's stress after natural disasters (2012, August 28) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-08-children-stress-natural-disasters.html>

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