

Disasters and kids – how to help them recover

August 17 2016, by Betty Lai

Louisiana's historic floods have killed [at least eight people](#). As many as 20,000 others have been rescued and thousands have been forced into shelters.

Disasters, whether natural, like hurricanes and floods, or man-made, like wars, can cause tremendous upheaval in people's lives.

Imagine what being evacuated from your home – even temporarily – would feel like. What about having your home and all of your possessions destroyed? For adults, these are traumatic and deeply distressing experiences. For [kids](#), they may be even more distressing. Losing a home for a kid may mean losing the only home in which he or she has ever lived.

According to the U.N., young people, including [children](#), are the largest group of people affected by [disasters](#) across the world. Over [100 million](#) youth around the world are exposed to disasters each year. In the United States, it is estimated that approximately [14 percent of children](#) will experience a disaster in childhood.

As a professor at Georgia State University, I have studied how kids cope after disasters like Hurricanes Katrina, Charley, Ike and Andrew, major wildfires, and how children respond to ongoing trauma like the Gulf Crisis. I've found that most kids will emerge from these experience just fine. But for a [small minority](#), the effects can linger for years.

Distress symptoms are common in the aftermath of disasters

It is very common for children to report symptoms of post-traumatic stress, depression and anxiety after a disaster.

These symptoms might look like nightmares or flashbacks to the disaster, avoiding reminders of the event or being more worried about events in general. Children may also have trouble in school or be more [sedentary](#). Very [young children](#) do not have well-developed verbal skills, and they may not be able to describe emotional distress.

But for most kids these symptoms don't last for very long. My colleagues and I followed children after [Hurricane Andrew in 1991](#), and found that by one year after Andrew, most kids had bounced back or were recovering from symptoms of trauma. Just 20 percent still reported elevated symptoms.

In another study following kids after [Hurricane Katrina](#) in 2005, we found that 71 percent bounced back and returned to normal levels of functioning within one to two years after the disaster.

A small minority of children are deeply affected by disasters. About [4 percent](#) of the children we followed after Katrina reported severe symptoms that had not resolved more than two years later. For example, children reported having flashbacks to Katrina, avoiding reminders of Katrina and feeling irritable.

However, experiencing post-traumatic stress in childhood may have lasting impacts on children, even if they bounce back. In one study, we assessed children living in Kuwait who were exposed to the Gulf Crisis in 1991, and followed up with them again 10 years later. Kids who

reported [higher levels](#) of post-traumatic stress symptoms in 1991 experienced more difficulties in terms of their education and occupation outcomes as they moved [into adulthood](#).

Why do some kids struggle while others rebound?

A [child](#)'s exposure to stressors during and immediately after the disaster is a key factor that predicts whether he or she will struggle after potentially traumatic events. For instance, did the child think he would die during the disaster? Did she witness someone being hurt? What other stressors did he experience?

School-aged children are often able to describe these stressors clearly, despite the fact that their language skills are less well-developed. For example, my colleagues and I [asked](#) children in grades three and four to write about their experiences during Hurricane Ike. One child wrote, "My home sunk. My tracter [sic] sunk. My cat ran away." Another children wrote, "There was no food that we could get but we got some from the red cross [sic]."

Adults don't always know what kids are feeling

Surprisingly, adults are not good judges of what children experience during disasters. Although this finding is often surprising to adults, research suggests that parents are not great [judges](#) of child behavior and feelings generally.

In our [study](#) of children after Hurricane Katrina, we asked mothers and children what happened during and after Katrina. There was very little agreement between what moms thought had happened to the child compared with what the child said had happened. For example, we asked mothers and children whether their homes were badly damaged and

whether clothes and toys were ruined during the disaster.

Higher levels of disagreement in responses between mom and child predicted higher levels of distress in the child. These differences may highlight the need for parents to recognize their children's distress in order to be able to meet their child's needs.

How can you help children be more resilient after a disaster?

Changes in school performance, or how often they are seeing friends, or not enjoying activities as much as before can all be warning signs that children may be struggling after a disaster.

Stressors such as parents changing jobs or someone in the family becoming ill tend to increase after disasters, and they can make recovering from a disaster even harder for children. Adults should be aware of that and teach children coping skills like identifying feelings and problem-solving.

Since parents might not be that good at guessing how their child feels, it's good to ask them. Do not assume that you know. At the same time, if a child says he is feeling fine after the trauma and appears to be functioning well, do not assume that he is "hiding" how he really feels.

The news often displays the worst experiences that happen to people during disasters. Exposing children to too many of these images and stories may retraumatize them. Give children information that is appropriate for their age.

The most important thing is to get children back into their routines as soon as possible. Routines are comforting to children, and help them feel

like life is "back on track."

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