

Children with aggressive behavior vary in ability to adjust after being exposed to tornadoes

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When a large group of children with aggressive behavior experienced devastating tornadoes, many of those with higher anxiety showed greater resilience, according to a study published online in the *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, published by the Society of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology.

"Initially, we thought that children with higher levels of [anxiety](#) prior to the tornado would develop intensified behavioral problems after the disaster," said John Lochman, PhD, ABPP, lead author of the study. "Surprisingly, children's anxiety appeared to help them handle the stress of a natural disaster more resiliently than those who had lower anxiety levels before the tornado hit."

Four [tornadoes](#) with winds up to 200 miles per hour tore through Tuscaloosa County, Ala. In April, 2011, killing 41 people and injuring more than 950. Researchers sought to understand how pre-existing mental health symptoms influenced the behavioral and psychological adjustment of children in post-disaster situations. The study examined the effects from varying levels of exposure on 360 children in the fourth, fifth and sixth grades who had been previously enrolled in a behavioral treatment program, as well as their parents.

Participants had been previously selected based on aggression levels rated by their parents and teachers. They were enrolled in one of two

intervention groups that teach children to use cognitive-behavioral strategies for goal setting, emotion regulation, and social problem solving. Data were collected on children's and parents' trauma exposure, and the children's aggression levels in three waves: once before the tornado, within six months, and then one year after the tornado.

In addition to children's reactions, aggression, and anxiety levels, researchers also examined parents' reactions to the tornado's effects. The children of parents who reported actually fearing for their lives showed a corresponding response in terms of internalizing behavioral problems, the researchers found.

"We believe that the parents' emotional reactions to the consequences of this tornado may have had an impact on how their children reacted as well - causing them to show more signs of post-traumatic stress symptoms and aggression," said Lochman.

The findings in this study suggest that children who are already involved in programs to help prevent [aggressive behavior](#) may benefit from the program's effects even after a disaster. Additionally, in offering psychological intervention for children exposed to the devastating effects of [natural disasters](#), programs may consider focusing attention on [children](#) with lower levels of anxiety, since they may benefit more from additional therapeutic assistance after a natural disaster.

More information: John E. Lochman et al, Pre–Post Tornado Effects on Aggressive Children's Psychological and Behavioral Adjustment Through One-Year Postdisaster, *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1080/15374416.2016.1228460](https://doi.org/10.1080/15374416.2016.1228460)

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