



## Helping Your Child or Teen Respond to a Disaster or Emergency



All children are different. Some children might have symptoms of stress right after the event, while some may take weeks to have symptoms. Some children don't have any symptoms at all. With care, attention, and understanding from parents and caregivers, symptoms of stress often go away on their own. If these symptoms don't go away, your child might need to see a healthcare provider. If you are not sure how to support your child or teen, get support from a trusted friend or mental health professional.

### The Media

Although you need to stay informed, seeing or hearing information about a traumatic event over and over again can cause more stress. A child or teen might have an emotional or behavioural reaction because they don't fully understand the event. A child or teen's level of understanding and ways of coping will be different at different ages.

- Limit exposure to distressing images, TV, or radio reports.
- Watch or listen to reports on disasters or emergencies with your child or teen. Afterwards, talk about what was seen and heard. Your child needs your guidance and reassurance.



For more information on how to help your child learn to cope, visit:

[www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)  
*(click on the tab called "families & youth" then go to "facts for families")*

[www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org)  
*(enter the keywords "resources for parents and caregivers" in the search box)*

If you or someone you know needs support, call:  
Health Link Alberta  
Toll Free: 1-866-408-LINK (5465)  
Calgary: 403-943-LINK  
Edmonton: 780-408-LINK

For information on how to request additional copies of this resource email:  
[HPDIP.MH.EarlyID@albertahealthservices.ca](mailto:HPDIP.MH.EarlyID@albertahealthservices.ca)  
Alberta Health Services  
Mental Health Screening & Early Identification  
10101 Southport Road S.W.  
Calgary, AB T2W 3N2

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**Any change in a child's environment or routine can make the child feel insecure, scared, or confused.**

## R.E.A.C.T.

**R**emove yourself and your loved ones from danger. During an emergency or disaster, finding shelter, water, and food is the first step. Staying safe and keeping calm is important in helping you and your child in an emergency.

**E**at nutritious food and drink water. Limit foods that are high in sugar. These types of foods or drinks give you a quick boost, but end up making you feel worse.

**A**ctivity. Return to your normal routine as quickly and much as possible. Try to do what your family normally did before the event (e.g., eat meals together, walk together, play games, watch television, read bedtime stories). Routines can help children feel safe and calm. Make time for your child to be physically active. For a young child, it is important to have time to play. Distractions like card games or colouring books are good for small children. Teens might want to do community work and might need tasks to do to stay involved in response efforts.

**C**onnect and use supports when needed. Caregivers, families, peers, and community all help your child or teen to respond and cope with trauma. A parent's reaction to the stress of an event can affect how a child reacts. Model calm and constructive reactions to help your child feel calm. Find ways to help others when you can and accept help from others when you need it. This will help remind you and your child that you are not alone. Accepting help from others who can give it helps to build community and a sense of hope.

**T**alk about it. Encourage, but don't force your child or teen to talk about the event. Let your child know it's okay to feel mad, sad, or scared. Listen to your child's stories without interrupting. Let your child know you understand how he or she feels. Children look up to adults for examples of how to act. Your child will copy how you talk about and cope with your feelings and concerns. If you talk about how you feel openly and calmly, this will help model a healthy coping style. Make time to give your child extra comforting if he or she needs it.

Children and teens react to trauma and loss differently than adults do. Not all children or teens react the same way. It is important to know what to expect. Show care and understanding to help your child or teen recover.

## Common Reactions to Stress

Children under 5 years old, may:

- go back to doing things like he or she did when younger
- be afraid of strangers, animals, or monsters
- have changes in sleep patterns (sleep more or sleep less)
- have trouble falling asleep on their own
- start having nightmares
- cry more than normal
- change eating habits
- complain about aches or pains
- get confused easily
- want to always be with (cling to) adult caregivers
- have trouble talking (e.g., stuttering)

Children between 6 and 12 years old, may:

- return to behaviours he or she did when younger
- have trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, or be scared to sleep alone
- have trouble concentrating (e.g., at school)
- complain of a headache or stomach ache without an obvious cause
- be more aggressive or withdrawn
- ask about spiritual beliefs
- have trouble with any medical problems (e.g., diabetes)

Teens between 13 and 18 years old may:

- have trouble sleeping (too much or too little)
- complain of aches and pains, headaches, or stomach or bowel problems
- get sad or depressed
- be withdrawn or quiet
- act out or have aggressive behaviour
- have trouble with school or not want to go to school
- ask about spiritual beliefs
- feel guilty about surviving (if people have been hurt or have died)
- have trouble with any medical problems (e.g., diabetes)

