

Tip Sheets

Supporting Children Following an Emergency Event

Children and their families may need financial, physical, and emotional assistance to help them recover following an emergency event. Their families may experience much change and multiple losses, including having to leave their homes, finding new employment, and changing schools, among other changes after an emergency event.

The Recovery Phase



The recovery phase of an emergency event refers to the hours, days, weeks, months, and sometimes years following an

emergency. Some of the goals of this phase are to restore program operations in a safe environment and assist children and their families. Recovery is an ongoing process to support the mental, physical, and emotional health of children and their families.

Action Steps for Recovery

For early care and education professionals, one of the tasks of recovery is the identification of how to best support children, families, and program professionals in returning to daily routines and regaining a sense of normalcy. This may include:

- Restoring program services and returning to the promotion of children's development, growth, and learning as soon as possible.
- Monitoring how children, families, and program professionals are doing.
- Identifying resources/interventions available to children, families, and program professionals.
- Debriefing with program professionals, families, first responders, and community

partners regarding "lessons learned" to revise the program's emergency preparedness plan.

- Supporting children using books and activities that address aspects of the emergency event.

The Importance of Basic Needs

The first step in supporting young children following an emergency event is to ensure that their basic needs are being met. This means making sure that each child has shelter, a physical environment that is safe, food, and water. Children need to trust and know that these needs will be met to enable them to physically and emotionally heal and recover after an emergency event.

Help Children Feel Safe

The impact of an emergency event may change a child's perspective of the world as a safe and predictable place to a place that no longer feels safe and predictable. One of the most important things that early care and education professionals can do is to help children feel safe.

Provide Reassurance

Early care and education professionals can reassure the children that their priority is to keep them safe by drawing attention to- and sharing some of the things that are being done to ensure their safety.

- Show an emergency plan has been created. Talk about and practice emergency drills.
- Keep the first aid kit nearby.
- Point out the fire extinguisher, escape route plan, and smoke/carbon monoxide detectors.

Resume Normal Routine

Because young children feel safer and function more effectively when they know what to expect, it is important to return to- and maintain a familiar routine as soon as possible. It is important to be aware of children who are not yet able to return to all of the daily routines and provide them with choices. Children should not be forced to do something they are not yet ready to do.

Have Fun

Have fun with the children! It is okay to be silly. Laughter is therapeutic and helps individuals heal.

Express Feelings

Experiencing an emergency event can be overwhelming and provoke a myriad of feelings for children and adults. Young children may not yet be able to identify, name, and express their feelings.

- Help children identify their feelings, such as “Butterflies in the stomach” may signal anxiety.
- Help children name their feelings.
- Help children express their feelings in appropriate ways, such as through drawing.
- Use children’s books to support children’s understanding and emotional development.
- Acknowledge and respect their feelings, and let children know that it is normal and okay to have these feelings. A child who feels fearful, feels fearful even if adults think the reason for the fear is irrational or invalid.

Ask Questions

Let children know it is okay to talk about the emergency event by asking if they have questions or concerns. If a child does not have questions, do not force the child. Some children need more time and may have questions later. Make sure answers to are developmentally appropriate, age appropriate, simple, accurate and direct.

Be Flexible and Patient

Finding a “new normal” takes time. Be patient with children who continue to ask the same questions. Children use repetition of information as a source of comfort. Be consistent in your responses to children’s questions and requests for information.

Share Information

When an event is not discussed it can seem even more frightening to children. Begin by talking with the children about what they know and what they think happened. Listen carefully for misinformation, misunderstanding, and underlying fears. Don’t deny upsetting details that a child shares if these details are accurate. Remember to be cautious and avoid sharing unnecessary details that may further confuse or frighten children. Do not promise that everything will be okay and/or that life will return to being the same as it was before the event.

Limit Media Exposure

Children are naturally curious and will seek basic information and ask questions about an emergency event/disaster to help them understand what is happening in the world around them. However, exposure to disaster-related images and sounds in the media can frighten children and heighten their stress/anxiety. Watch media coverage with older children and use it as an opportunity to talk about the event, their feelings and answer their questions.

For more information, visit
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