

## HELPING YOUR CHILD THROUGH NATURAL AND PERSONAL CRISIS

Many of us have been shaken and disturbed by the media images of the tragedies left in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. As adults, we have difficulty dealing with the reality of 'the worst case scenario' unfolding just a short distance away from our own comfortable homes. It is no wonder that some of our children who have heard others talking or have seen pictures of demolished homes / crying and injured victims / lifesaving efforts and flooded streets, are feeling frightened and anxious. A few years ago as we dealt with our own hurricane issues, I had a conversation with a young student who was expressing fears over hearing that a hurricane was coming here. She heard the sounds of an approaching thunderstorm and was sure that it was a hurricane. She was convinced that we would all be swallowed up by the water and the ground. I assured her that the thunder she was hearing was not a hurricane but a storm. I promised her that I had never heard of a hurricane 'swallowing people' and suggested that she talk with her mom and dad about her fear of hurricanes. We also talked about what we do at school to keep children safe during storms. With that worry off her mind, she was able to go back with her class and have a fun afternoon with her friends.

During hurricane seasons, we know that no matter what precautions we take, we cannot shelter our children from all natural and personal crises. When such occasions arise, a few thoughts to consider.....

**\*\*Whoever made the statement "Little ears have big pictures." was most likely the parent of an anxious child. When curious questions go unanswered, children tend to 'fill-in-the-blanks with their imagination. When your child is anxious, asking open-ended questions such as "What do you think a hurricane is like?" or "What do you think will happen?" will encourage the child to explore their fears. The child who has difficulty expressing fears in words, may be able to draw pictures or sing a song. Take time to really LISTEN, answer questions with age-appropriate facts, and correct any misinformation. Through active listening, determine what your child fears. Sometimes we make the mistake of projecting our own ideas and fears to our children and totally miss the real source of their fear. I recall in incident when my oldest daughter was 5. We had just moved to Tallahassee and on our first outing, I took a wrong turn and couldn't figure out how to get home. All my attempts at assuring her that we would get home could not calm her until she was able to share what her real concerns were---she was hungry and she didn't have her pajama's and her toothbrush, and that she would 'never see her daddy again!'**

(Dad was pleased that he made it on her list of concerns.) I assured her that we would get something to eat because I had money in my purse for food and that we could stop to phone dad and that he would give us directions to get home where her pajamas and toothbrush would be waiting.

**\*\*Reassure your child that no matter what happens that the most important thing is that the family will be able to deal with whatever happens. Material things can be replaced.**

**\*\*Share with your children what your plan is to insure their safety should a hurricane hit our neighborhood. Discuss what your plan would be if \_\_\_\_ happened. There is comfort in knowing that there is a plan no matter what the ages of your family. (Both our daughters while watching the events of Hurricane Katrina called to inquire what our plan would be and wanted assurance that we would not say on the island during a serious storm such as Katrina.) If possible, let your children prepare their own 'hurricane kit' with flashlight, water, snacks, and a favorite book or toy.**

**\*\*Help your child learn to have a healthy respect for nature by taking the necessary precautions 'just-in-case'. Pay attention to what local emergency management professionals advise. This demonstrates your respect for the knowledge and wisdom of people who assist in your efforts to keep your family safe.**

**\*\*Children who are already anxious or fearful may need some extra 'mommy and daddy' time to feel secure. Limit television and radio exposure by involving them in other activities.**

**\*\*Helping other families who have been affected by natural and personal crises demonstrates that there are always people who are willing to help if there is a need. By contributing or helping Red Cross or other relief agencies, helps your child(ren) feel comforted by the idea that if they or your family ever need assistance, help would be available.**

Although it is not possible to prepare your child to deal with all potential dangers, the best way to help your child and give him/her resources to cope with such events is to provide a safe, supportive, and loving home environment.

Wishing you safety from the storms and peace in your hearts and homes,  
Mary Warren

Resources: [iVillage.com](http://iVillage.com), [keepkidshealthy.com](http://keepkidshealthy.com)