



8605 Allisonville Road, #140
Indianapolis, IN 46250-1552
317-596-2202 i-cart.org

After the Tornado: Tips for Parents: Helping Your Child Adjust

The tornados that occurred in many parts of Indiana during the summer became a traumatic event for individuals, families and communities. Children of all ages react differently to the trauma of a natural disaster and the family and community stress that occurs in the aftermath. Some will seem to come through the tornado unaffected. Children who were not directly impacted by the tornado may experience some of the same reactions as those who were. There may be immediate reactions, delayed reactions, both or no reactions. Others will react strongly from the start even if they have suffered little loss or injury. Storms may result in new fears. Most children, like adults, have normal and typical reactions to abnormal circumstances that accompany a natural disaster like a tornado in their community. Children generally experience more anxiety than their parents or teachers are aware of. They may become easily upset or hide their distress to protect other family members. Many reactions of children are not evident until months after the disaster.

Common Reactions:

1. A need to talk about the tornado and their experiences
2. A need to ask the same question and/or to hear the same answer over and over again
3. Increased physical complaints...headaches, stomachaches, etc.
4. Behavioral changes: difficulty paying attention, focusing; and/or remembering things; irritability; vivid memories that intrude during the day; anger; tantrums, anxiety; withdrawal or isolation; sadness; children and adolescents often regress to behavior from an earlier time period (clinging to parent, wanting to be or sleep in the same room as parent, bedwetting, thumb sucking, crying easily, tantrums, etc.)
5. Sadness and longing for the “way things use to be”
6. Academic performance suffers (falling grades, disruptiveness in class, rudeness toward adults, falling asleep in class, attendance problems)...this may occur in the fall or even months after the tornados of this summer
7. Dreams and nightmares are more common, especially about the tornado...sleep difficulties.
8. Children and adolescents may show insight and an increasing concern for others

9. Adolescents may lose some of their sense of invulnerability. Especially for adolescents, watch for risk taking behavior, changes in peer groups, changes in appearance, loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities, substance abuse, hostility and increased irritability, or an increase in “challenging” adult authority

The intensity of a child’s reactions depends on a variety of factors: the amount of loss experienced, threat of life, the family reactions to the tornado and the aftermath of the tornado, financial changes and stress in the home, stress or a troubled home before the disaster, the support system that the child has available, previous losses and previous coping mechanisms. Any marked change in behavior, whether immediate or even months afterwards, often suggests a strong need for mental health consultation. Extreme behaviors also signal a need for intervention (destructive acts toward people, animals or property, frequent panic attacks, an inability or unwillingness to socialize that lasts for several weeks or longer and significantly impacts the child’s daily activities, etc). Remember that seeking assistance is a strength not a weakness and it can help prevent a concern from becoming even a larger concern.

Tips for Parents:

1. Provide repeated opportunities for children to talk. Children may need to repeat the stories of their experiences many times...they need to talk about what they saw, heard, felt and did during the tornado and after the tornado. They also need to talk about what their biggest fear or concern is now. Also use it as an opportunity to talk about what they learned about their community and how people help each other. Make sure the child knows you are listening to him/her. Young children draw pictures or express their responses in play. Older children may want to journal.
2. Control rumors and correct any myths that children may have regarding the tornado and reactions to it. People can respond just as strongly to a rumor or myth as an actual event.
3. Reassure your child that many of their reactions are common reactions and that everyone reacts differently.
4. Return to your family’s daily routines as soon as possible (meal times, bedtimes, birthday celebrations, family outings and favorite activities, etc.). Remind your child of what has not changed and most importantly that you have each other.
5. Do not hesitate to reach out to your child’s school to share any concerns or to ask for assistance. Remember that some children do not exhibit significant concerns until months later. Be receptive to any concerns that the school may share with you.
6. Share your grief or feelings about the tornado. This helps your child express his/her feelings also. Talk about the family plan for coping and recovery and how long it may take. Don’t make promises that you might not be able to keep. Help the child accept some losses as permanent. Make explanations simple for younger children.
7. Younger children often express fear and anger through play. Acknowledge their feelings as ok.
8. Hold and comfort your child...adolescents also need this type of support.
9. If your child lost a special possession, allow them time to grieve or cry. Allow the child the time they need to work through this. Remember, what is important to a child may not appear to be that significant to an adult.
10. If your child wants to help others, locally or nationally or to respond in this way to future disasters, provide them the opportunity and support to do so.