



Psychological First Aid

Adults Working with Children and Teens

When Disaster Strikes

As a parent or guardian, you set limits and teach values as you guide children and teens into adulthood. You don't expect them to face life's challenges in the same way that you do. You want to protect them and help them learn about the world outside of your control.

So, how will you respond in those hours and days after a disaster? What can you do to comfort the children in your care?

Psychological First Aid in Situations with Children and Teens

Children and teens often react based on cues they pick up from the adults around them. Though, you cannot always predict how a child or teen will react to what he sees or experiences. Even if you are calm, confident and in control, you should anticipate that children may experience a range of reactions based on their age, family stability, physical and mental health, past traumatic experiences, and whether or not they have been separated from their parents or guardians.



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This responsibility is challenging and, at times, stressful. Now think about how important your role becomes when disaster strikes your community. As a parent with your own children or as an adult caring for other children, you know how young people will look to you as the person in charge. They want to believe you are in control, know what to do, and will protect them.



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- Try exercising or other physical activity to relieve stress.
- Engage in helpful, productive activities that are satisfying and useful in the situation.
- Follow the advice you would give others.
- Manage your own reaction when faced with emotional outbursts from others by:
 - ▶ Remaining quiet and calm.
 - ▶ Avoiding the temptation to engage in a shouting match.
 - ▶ Acknowledging the person's point of view.
 - ▶ Disengaging and respectfully walking away from the person if you are being insulted or threatened.
 - ▶ Contacting law enforcement personnel if you feel that you are in danger.

For more information about Emergency Preparedness and Psychological First Aid, refer to www.ready.gov, www.ncptsd.org, and www.nctsn.org.

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PFA in Practice

No matter what the circumstances or the reactions are, it is important to provide comfort and assurance. Children and teens will need to know that they are safe and surrounded by adults who care about them.

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is a way to give emotional support and help to youth of any age, ethnic and cultural heritage, and social and economic background in the immediate aftermath of disaster.

You can use PFA to meet the basic needs of people in stressful situations, no matter what the differences are among them. PFA will provide you with basic strategies to help people cope with their pressing concerns and needs in the days and weeks after the disaster.

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Reach out to those who need help and provide comfort care.

- Make certain that children and teens in your care are safe and out of harm's way.
- Offer immediate assistance to distressed individuals by looking for ways to keep them comfortable (e.g., providing blankets and water or directing them to a place to sit).
- Convey that you are there to help and that you care.
- Stay close to them; make sure they can see you or another adult who is in charge at all times.

Recognize basic needs and support problem-solving.

- Get them something to eat and drink, if they are hungry or thirsty.
- Be prepared to accompany them to nearby bathrooms, ensuring their safety in unfamiliar environments.
- Help them clean up and change into fresh clothes.
- Be patient with them, and be prepared to explain things more than once.
- Assume a position at eye level when you address youngsters, and use words they can understand.
- Arrange activities that will keep them engaged and helpful, such as recreational activities or helping out in an evacuation shelter while they wait to return home.
- Recognize and attend to their medical conditions.

- Locate their parents or guardians as soon as the situation allows it.

Validate feelings and thoughts.

- Listen and hear what children and teens have to say by being fully present and attentive.
- Allow them to talk as little or as much as they care to. Try not to push too hard to get them to talk about what happened or how they are feeling.
- Avoid the temptation to judge the rightness or wrongness of their reactions; just accept their thoughts and feelings for what they are.

Provide accurate and timely information.

- Provide accurate information in response to their questions as soon as you can or have the information available to you.
- Treat all questions seriously and offer truthful answers.
- Avoid the temptation to ignore questions that seem unimportant to you.
- Gauge the amount of information the child can understand; wait until he or she asks a question before providing details of the situation.

Connect children with support systems.

- Reunite them with family members.
- Facilitate spiritual practices as practiced in your family or as desired and requested by children and teens in your care.

- Contact medical professionals who can help with physical conditions and medication needs.

- Consider seeking help from mental health professionals, especially if they exhibit risky or dangerous behaviors or ask to see a counselor.

Provide education about stress responses.

- Help them to understand the stress they may be experiencing in response to the situation will lessen with time.
- Exercise caution that you don't minimize their reactions.
- Seek help from medical or mental health professionals to understand more about stress responses.

Reinforce strengths and positive coping strategies.

- Make it possible for them to get back to routine activities as soon as practical.
- Help them choose healthy foods and minimize the amount of junk food they eat.
- Help them achieve a regular sleep pattern.
- Encourage physical activities and combine these activities with useful tasks.

Take care of yourself.

- Get enough rest and eat healthy foods.
- Pay attention to your own stress responses.
- Seek out family and friends for support.