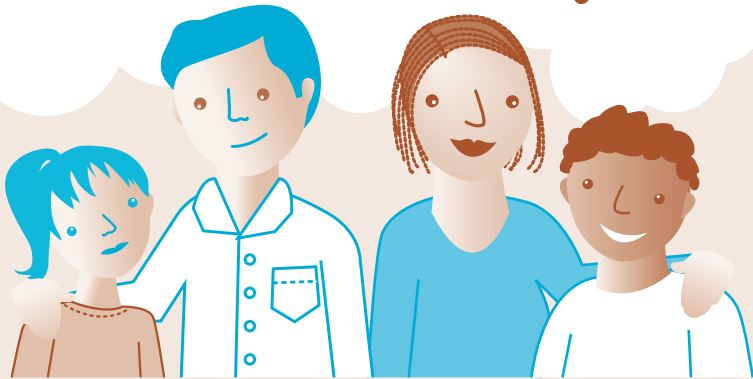


Helping Children and Teens Cope with Hurricane Season: A Guide for Parents and Caregivers

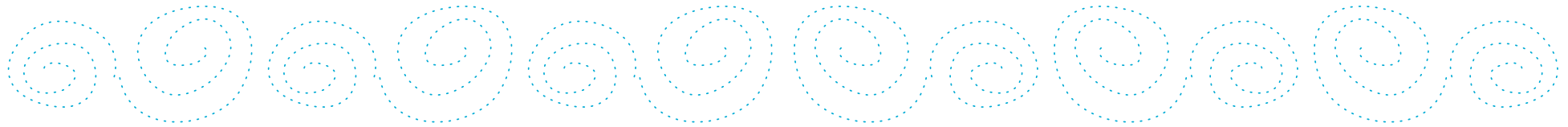


This hurricane season parents may notice their children and teens having more problems than usual. Storm warnings, wind, humid heat, driving rain--all can bring back memories of those terrible days during and after Hurricane Katrina and Rita. Just like adults, children can be upset by events months and even years afterwards. Mercy Corps, a Portland, OR-based relief and development organization, prepared this brochure for families living in the Gulf Coast area. In it, we share what parents have found useful to help children heal after a disaster.

Be a Model:

You first. To take care of children and teens, it is important that you nurture yourself. Take time for yourself with friends, faith, music, and creative outlets. Try to eat right and exercise. Seek alone time and quietness. Taking just 10 minutes each day for YOU can really help! Talk about your feelings with people you trust; ask for help when you need it. Children often get worried when the adults around them are worried. If you can stay genuinely calm and positive, this will go a long way in reassuring your children. Taking care of yourself will help you be there for your children.





What You Might Notice:

When something is worrying a child, they tend to 'show' us rather than 'tell' us. Children may seem sad, spacey, or irritable, or they may have physical complaints like headaches, stomachaches and sleep problems. For children who survived Katrina or Rita, difficult memories can come back as nightmares, scary thoughts, or a wave of anxiety.

Sights, smells or sounds can bring back powerful feelings associated with the original event. This is normal and usually recedes with time. It can be cause for concern, though, when children seem trapped in the past, plagued by bad feelings, stuck, not enjoying even the things they used to.

Younger children often don't have words for their feelings – sometimes they just repeat what they've heard; you need to really 'look and listen' to learn what they're feeling. Here are some ways you can find out.



Listen for Feelings:

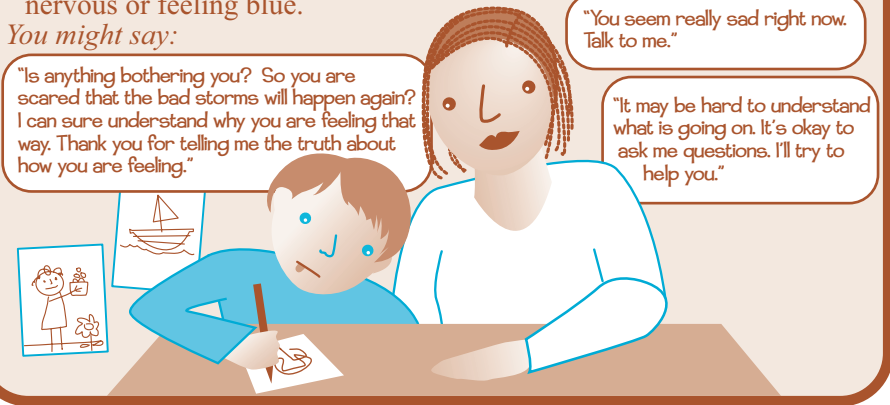
- Telling stories: Ask your child to tell you a story - listen for hints of worry or anxiety, or make up a story with your child - they make up part of it - you make up part of it.
- Draw pictures and play with younger children. If they are allowed to 'direct the action,' often what is on their mind emerges. If your child seems sad or anxious, ask them if there is anything wrong.
- Notice changes in children's behavior, and keep an eye on how they are getting along with their friends. Do they seem more aggressive, or more withdrawn?
- Do a quick check on your own messages about feelings. Your child needs to know that all feelings are okay, even 'negative' ones like being nervous or feeling blue.

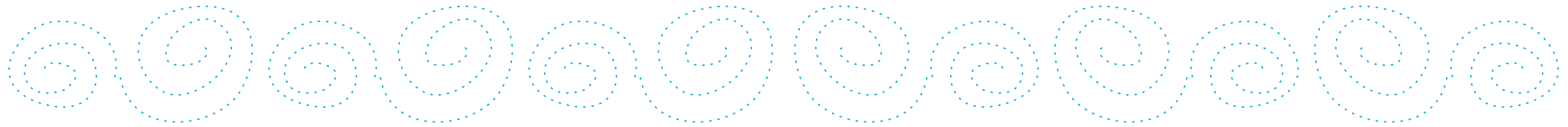
You might say:

"Is anything bothering you? So you are scared that the bad storms will happen again? I can sure understand why you are feeling that way. Thank you for telling me the truth about how you are feeling."

"You seem really sad right now. Talk to me."

"It may be hard to understand what is going on. It's okay to ask me questions. I'll try to help you."





Provide Support:

These are some techniques that might help if children seem tense, worried, or anxious:

- Spend more time with them (games, sports, art, etc.) when they seem sad or scared.
- For anxious children, try ‘soothing’ activities: taking a bath, hugging, reading a book, or listening to music.
- Keep a regular schedule for eating, going to bed/waking up, and bathing.
- If this is important in your life, share your spiritual beliefs with your children.
- If a younger child is upset, consider distractions such as singing a familiar song, counting backwards, or reciting the alphabet.
- Allow children and teens to make choices about meals, activities, and clothes to wear.

You might say:

“Did you notice how you helped yourself get through that?”

“You are finding ways to feel better.”

“You must feel proud...”

Relaxing the Body:

Find a quiet, comfortable area and encourage the child to sit back, and take deep breaths.

- If a specific area of the child’s body is tight, have them tense that area for 5 seconds, then relax it. You may want to repeat this exercise a few times for the specific area of the child’s body, or you can tense and relax the whole body from the feet to the head
- Help the child notice the difference between being tense and being relaxed.

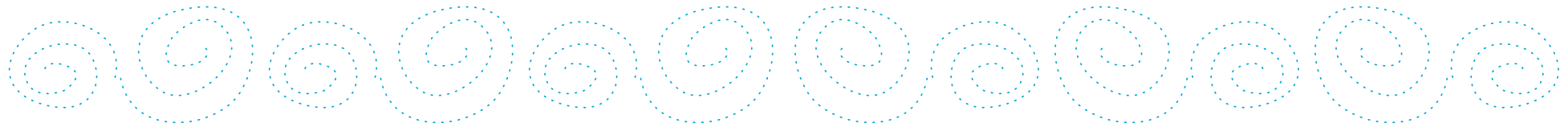
You might say:

“Now take a deep breath and hold it while I count to five, and keep your tummy real tight, squeeze it...
one...two...three...four...five

Now, breathe out through the mouth and let your tummy relax... go soft... that feels so much better now.

Concentrate on feeling nice and loose and relaxed. Let the tummy stay more relaxed for a while now...”





Grounding in the Present:

This technique is useful when children are in the grip of strong emotions and memories.

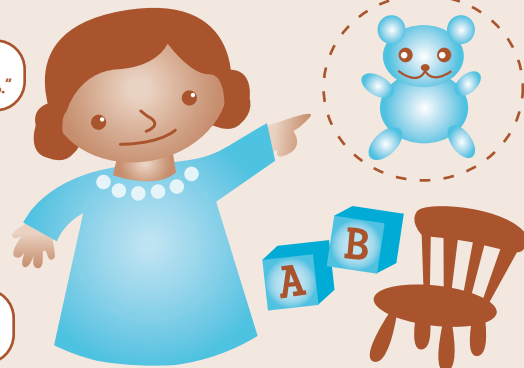
- Encourage the child to take slow, deep breaths and to sit down comfortably.
- Have children look around the room and report on what they see, what they hear, and what they smell. You might go first, saying something like “I see a blue cup on the table,” or “I hear someone talking in the distance.” Suggest that they touch something nearby—this might be a piece of jewelry, a favorite stuffed animal, the padded arm of a chair, or a pet.

“Remember to take deep breaths. This can help slow down the thoughts.”

“It will be OK. This will pass.”

“Your mind and body are very strong. You can do this.”

“I am right here with you. I will help to keep you safe.”

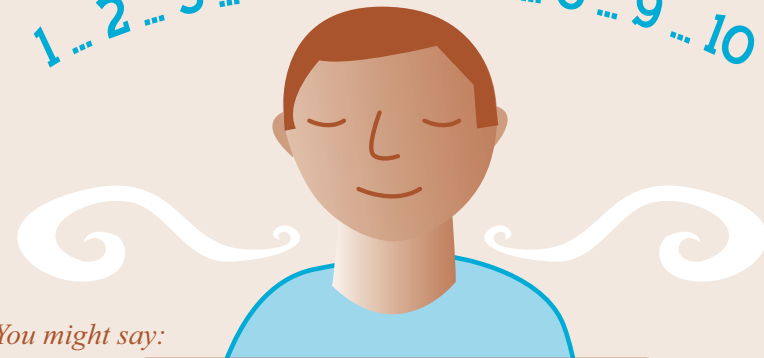


Deep Breathing:

Suggest that the child breathe in very slow, deep breaths through the nose so that their belly blows up like a balloon. Then let the air flow out slowly through the mouth, allowing the body to become more and more relaxed.

Count out ten slow, gentle breaths. Encourage children to breathe this way whenever they are feeling stress.

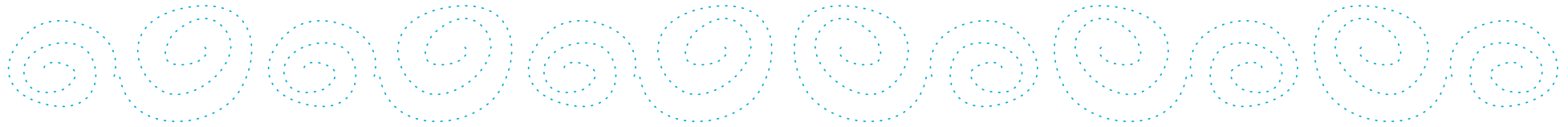
1...2...3...4...5...6...7...8...9...10



You might say:

“Many people, from Olympic athletes to famous musicians, use deep breathing to feel calmer.”





Protect Children:



Take active steps to **protect** children from painful reminders of past trauma.

- Monitor the amount of hurricane news children see on the television or hear on the radio.
- Be available to discuss the news with them from your point of view, and answer questions in a way that they can understand.
- Be mindful of the impact of your conversations on children who are listening nearby. Be open about your feelings, but save especially overwhelming ones to share with another adult.

A Safe Place:

Together, decide on a special place your child can go when they feel upset. Even small or temporary homes usually have a nook or cranny that appeals to a child. It could be as simple as a colorful chair with some blankets or stuffed animals nearby.

Suggest that your child imagine a peaceful place. Have them close their eyes and bring to mind an image. This could be on a beach, in their bedroom, or on your lap. Help the child imagine what this beautiful place might look like, feel like, sound like, & smell like.

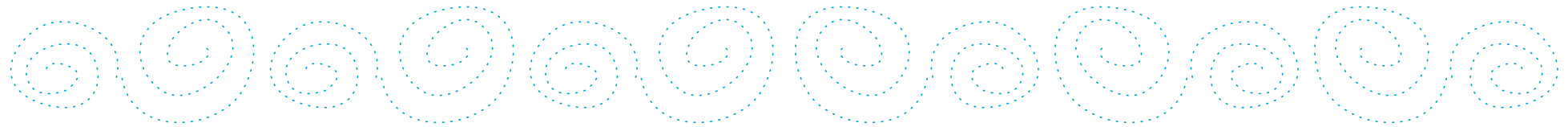


Plan for Safety:

Katrina and Rita were terrible. While we hope we won't experience anything like them again, experts predict this may be another bad year. The best recipe for helping children feel safe is to make sure they are safe. Planning and preparedness is an important part of that.

Create a family evacuation plan. Everyone in your family should know who goes with who, where they'll be going, and what things will be brought. Use your community disaster guidelines to help in your planning. Be prepared so an evacuation is called, you and your family can quickly assemble, pack up your pre-agreed critical belongings and leave.





Getting Help:

If your child or teen have any of the following extreme reactions, they need to be evaluated by a medical or mental health professional in your community.

- Threats to hurt themselves or others.
- Talk about death and dying.
- Unable to function normally with family and friends because of intense grief, anxiety or fears.
- Extreme avoidance of or withdrawal from things they used to enjoy doing.
- Re-experiencing the trauma through recurrent nightmares or flashbacks.
- Extreme feelings of guilt, depression, sadness.
- Dramatic swings in behavior, for example: sleeping, eating or talking significantly more or less than normal.

The support you give your children will directly affect how well they come through this hurricane season.

Brought to you by:



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Mercy Corps - Gulf Coast Hurricane Response
2223 Magazine St.
New Orleans, LA 70130
Tel: 504.525.5056

Mercy Corps
3015 SW 1st Avenue
Portland, OR 97201
Tel: 800-292-3355

Mercy Corps' work in the Gulf includes revitalizing neighborhoods, providing economic opportunity, supporting the development of civil society, helping children and families heal, and preserving cultural heritage. We work with and through more than 100 local partners.

See www.mercycorps.org/katrina for other Mercy Corps resources to help parents, providers and children who experienced Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

