

# Helping Children Recover After a Tornado

After a tornado, most families recover over time, particularly with the support of family, friends, and organizations. The length of recovery depends, in part, on how frightened individuals were and the extent of the damage and loss. Some families will be able to return to their normal routine rather quickly, while others will have to contend with repairing damage to their home and possessions, finding medical care, or facing financial hardship. Some families will have lost a loved one or a pet. Others will need to adjust to school closings or changes in school schedules.

Children's functioning will be influenced by how their parents and other caregivers cope during and after the tornado. Children often turn to adults for information, comfort, and help. Children do best when parents and teachers remain (or at least appear) calm, answer children's questions honestly, and respond as best they can to requests.

## Children's Reactions

Children will react differently to a tornado and its aftermath depending on their age, developmental level, and prior experiences. Some will withdraw, while others will have angry outbursts. Still others will become agitated or irritable. Parents should be sensitive to each child's coping style. The following are typical reactions children exhibit following a tornado or any natural disaster:



- Fear and worry about their safety or the safety of others, including pets
- Increase in physical complaints, such as headaches and stomachaches
- Fear of separation from family members
- Increased sensitivity to the sounds of wind or things crashing
- Clinging to parents, siblings, or teachers
- Change in school performance
- Worry that another tornado will come
- Long-lasting focus on the tornado, such as talking repeatedly about it or acting out the event in play
- Increase in activity level
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Decrease in concentration and attention
- Changes in appetite
- Withdrawal from others

- Lack of interest in usual activities, even playing with friends
- Angry outbursts or tantrums
- Regressive behaviors, such as baby talk, bedwetting, or tantrums
- Aggression toward parents, siblings, or friends
- Increase in teens' risky behaviors, such as drinking alcohol, using substances, harming themselves, or engaging in dangerous activities

## What Parents Can Do to Help Their Children

Parents should spend time talking to their children, letting them know that it is okay to ask questions and to share their worries. Although it will be hard finding time to have these conversations, parents can use regular family mealtimes or bedtimes to talk. Issues may come up more than once and parents should remain patient and open to answering questions and clarifying the situation. They can let children know, without overwhelming them with information, what is happening in the family, with their school, and in the community. Parents should answer questions briefly and honestly and ask their children for their opinions and ideas. To help younger children feel safe and calm after talking about the tornado, parents might read a favorite story or have a relaxing family activity.

To help children's recovery, parents should:

- **Be a role model.** Try to remain calm so that you can teach your child how to handle stressful situations.
- **Monitor adult conversations.** Be aware of what adults are saying about the tornado or the damage. Children listen to adults' conversations and may misinterpret what they hear, becoming unnecessarily frightened.
- **Limit media exposure.** Protect your child from too many images and descriptions of the tornado, including those on television, on the Internet, on radio, and in the newspaper.
- **Reassure children that they are safe.** You may need to repeat this frequently even after the tornado passes. Spend extra time with them, playing games outside, reading together indoors, or just cuddling. Be sure to tell them you love them.
- **Replace lost or damaged toys** as soon as you are able.

- **Calm worries about their friends' safety.** Even though phones may not be working, reassure your children that their friends' parents are taking care of them, just the way you are taking care of your children.
- **Tell children about community recovery.** Reassure them that the government is working hard to restore electricity, phones, water, and gas. Tell them that the town or city will be removing debris and helping families find housing.
- **Take care of your children's health.** Help them get enough rest, exercise, and healthy food and water. Give them both quiet and physical activities.
- **Review the family preparedness plan.** Some children will fear another tornado, particularly when there are aftershocks, so practicing the plan can help increase their sense of safety.
- **Maintain regular daily life.** In the midst of disruption and change, children feel more secure with structure and routine. As much as possible, have regular mealtimes and bedtimes.
- **Maintain expectations.** Stick to your family rules about good behavior and respect for others. Continue family chores, but keep in mind that children may need more reminding than usual.
- **Encourage children to help.** Children cope better and recover sooner when they help others. Give them small cleanup tasks or other ways to contribute. Afterward, provide activities unrelated to the tornado, such as playing cards or reading.
- **Be extra patient as your children return to school.** They may be more distracted and need extra help with homework for a while.
- **Give support at bedtime.** Children may be more anxious when separating from parents. Spend a little more time than usual talking, cuddling, or reading. Start the bedtime routine earlier so children get the sleep they need. If younger children need to sleep with you, let them know it is a temporary plan, and that soon they will go back to sleeping in their own beds.
- **Help with boredom.** The tornado may have disrupted the family's daily activities (watching television, playing on the computer, and having friends over) or caused the suspension of extracurricular activities (sports, youth groups, dances, or classes). Help children think of alternative activities, such as board games, card games, and arts and crafts. Try to find community programs (at the library, a park program, or a local YMCA) with child-friendly activities.
- **Keep things hopeful.** Even in the most difficult situation, your positive outlook on the future will help your children see good things in the world around them, helping them through challenging times.
- Seek professional help if your child still has difficulties more than six weeks after the tornado.

*Taken from the website of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network*

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## Do you need child care because of the tornado?

### We are here to help.

Contact our statewide Referral Center toll free. A specialist will assist you with finding an alternative child care arrangement. You can also search online for child care facilities by visiting our website.



Missouri's most trusted child care resource.

Call

**866-892-3228**

or visit

**[mo.childcareaware.org](http://mo.childcareaware.org)**