

Recovery: After a Flood

After a flood, most families will recover over time. The length of recovery will depend in part upon how frightening the flood was, if evacuation from home was necessary, the extent of the damage and loss, how well the family copes with post-flood stresses, and the amount of support from family, school, community, and organizations. Some families will be able to return to their normal routine quickly, while others will have to contend with destruction to their home and possessions, obtaining medical care, or overcoming financial hardship. Children especially will need time to recover if they have lost a loved one or pet or if their school has closed.

The ways that parents and other caregivers cope during and after the flood influence children's functioning. Children often turn to adults for information, comfort, and help. Parents and teachers should try to remain calm, answer children's questions honestly, and respond as best they can to requests. Children and adolescents do better when they understand the event they have just gone through.

Children's Reactions

Children react differently to a flood 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 flood or any natural disaster:

- Fear and worry about their safety or the safety of others, including pets
- Fear of separation from family members
- Clinging to parents, siblings, or teachers
- Worry that another flood will come
- Increase in activity level
- Trouble concentrating or paying attention
- Withdrawal from others
- Angry outbursts or tantrums
- Aggression toward parents, siblings, or friends
- Increase in physical complaints, such as headaches and stomachaches
- Change in school performance
- Long-lasting focus on the flood, such as talking repeatedly about it or acting out the event in play
- Increased sensitivity to reminders of the flood
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Changes in appetite
- Lack of interest in usual activities, even playing with friends
- Returning to earlier behaviors, such as baby talk, bedwetting, or tantrums
- 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, and that their reactions to the flood are normal. Although it will be hard finding time, 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 should 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 flood, 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 you can teach your child how to handle stressful situations. Your ability to cope during and after a disaster influences your child's recovery.

- Monitor adult conversations. Be aware of what adults are saying about the flood or the resulting damage. Children may misinterpret what they hear and be unnecessarily frightened.
- Limit media exposure. Protect your child from graphic depictions of the flood, including those on television, on the Internet, on the radio, and in the newspaper.
- Reassure children that they are safe. You may need to repeat this frequently even after the floodwaters recede. Spend extra time with them, playing games outside, reading together indoors, or just cuddling. Be sure to tell them you love them.
- Give extra comfort if your child has lost a pet. When you help him/her mourn appropriately, you help the recovery process.
- 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 children 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, healthy food, and safe drinking water. Be sure they have a balance of quiet times and physical activities.
- 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 that unrelated to the flood, such as playing cards or reading.
- Do not criticize children for changes in behavior, such as clinging to parents, acting out the flood in play, or seeking reassurance.
- As everyone copes differently, learn what works for each person in the family. Help family members tolerate these differences.
- Be extra patient once 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 flood 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 even the most challenging times.
- Seek professional help if your child still has difficulties more than six weeks after the flood.
- Keep in contact with your child's teacher and other adult caregivers about your child's experiences and reactions to the flood.

Therapy for Children

If children are still having the reactions described above more than six weeks after the flood, consult a mental health professional for an evaluation. If the clinician recommends counseling, keep in mind that cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) has the strongest evidence for helping children recover from a disaster. Therapy for children should typically include:

- Family involvement
- Awareness of child's developmental level and cultural/religious differences
- Assessment of preexisting mental health problems and prior traumas and loss
- Explanation and normalization of the child's psychological reactions to the flood

Relaxation exercises and other skills to manage reactions to reminders of the flood

- Problem-solving and anger management skills as needed
- Help to maintain normal developmental progression
- Increasing positive activities and rebuilding social connections

What Teachers Can Do to Help Their Students

- In a school with many students affected by floods, plan shorter lessons, go at a slower pace, give less homework than usual, and expect a decline in performance for a short time.
- Identify students who had direct experience with the floods, particularly those who suffered losses or had to evacuate, as they are at increased risk for distress.
- Monitor conversations you and your colleagues have about the floods, as you may share perceptions, feelings, and memories in ways that make children feel more anxious.
- Encourage distressed students to meet with the school counselors.
- Stay in touch with your students' parents and/or caregivers about academic performance and behavior.
- Suggest that your school review its crisis and emergency plans in order to better respond to future events.
- For those schools heavily affected by the flood, consider a postdisaster mental health recovery program for students and school personnel. The NCTSN provides information on these programs and other material for educators in the [Resources for School Personnel](#) section of this website.

What Teachers Can Do to Help Themselves

Teachers play an important role in helping their students recover. Simply returning to school promotes the welfare of children and families. Teachers should not neglect themselves as they work with children, adolescents, and families. Here are some self-care suggestions for teachers:

- Take care of yourself emotionally. You and your family may have had a stressful experience and suffered losses like those of your students. To be able to support them, you must have support yourself.
- Take care of yourself physically. Eat healthily, get enough sleep, drink plenty of water, and get proper medical care.
- Communicate with others. Make sure that you and your fellow teachers schedule ongoing times to talk together and give each other support. Teachers might consider covering for each other so they can address important personal/family issues.
- Give yourself a break. Try not to overdo clean-up activities. To reduce injury, avoid lifting heavy items or working for extended periods.
- Put off major decisions. Avoid making any unnecessary life-altering decisions during this stressful, postflood period.
- Take care of your own family. Even though you may be very committed to your students, you also need to spend time with and meet the needs of your own family members or friends.
- If you have many flood-related responsibilities, talk with your school administrators about temporarily altering your work schedule.