

Copyright © 2005 by The Salem News  
Reprinted with permission

September 26, 2005

By Dr. Edward Bailey  
Chief of Pediatrics,  
NSMC North Shore Children's Hospital



## Disasters and Our Children

First, Katrina, then Rita. In the past few weeks, our nation has been exposed to frightening, catastrophic storms that have devastated vast regions of the United States, leaving unparalleled death and destruction in their path, undermining our sense of security and unveiling our vulnerability.

As many as 25 percent of adults directly exposed to disasters may suffer post-traumatic stress or anxiety. While distance from these events provides a degree of physical safety, it does not shield us from the possibility of acute and long-term post-traumatic stress. How does the news of these disasters impact our children and how can we best respond to protect and treat them?

Children are not small adults. When directly exposed to a disaster, children are uniquely vulnerable to physical and psychological trauma. Their developing bodies and immature systems put them at risk for dehydration from limited water supplies and stressful environmental conditions. Children, even if only observing these frightening events on TV, experience increased anxiety because, unlike adults, they have a limited understanding of conditions. The potential personal damage may be compounded if children see their parents overwhelmed and unable to cope.

Each youngster possesses a combination of strengths and vulnerabilities. At different developmental stages, children respond to stresses differently, making global suggestions difficult. There are a few strategies, however, that parents can try to cushion the effects of disasters on their children:

- **When possible, after a catastrophic event or crisis, devote more time and attention to your children and keep your family together when appropriate and possible. Encourage children to share their concerns through discussion, or by writing stories or drawing pictures. Persuade them to talk, ask questions and share their feelings, letting them know it is normal to be upset.**

- **Clearly explain the disastrous situation**, but provide reassurance, telling children you are there to protect them (even if you feel anxious and insecure yourself). Children are very sensitive to parental anxiety, and although sharing concerns may be appropriate, parents must always provide an umbrella of security and protection.
- **In age appropriate ways**, allow children to lend a hand at home and to participate in community relief efforts, as it helps them regain control and a sense of security. Simple actions on your part, such as letting them pick their own clothes or keeping the light on at bedtime, can help establish a sense of security. Maintaining a regular family routine is very reassuring to children. Return to one as soon as possible if a disaster or other event disrupts the usual flow of activities.
- **Limit exposure to television**, as repeated viewing of a disaster can be traumatizing. Even older children, for whom limited viewing may be appropriate, should not repeatedly watch traumatic events alone.

Many children are very resilient and cope well in even the most traumatic situations. Others display numerous emotional responses suggestive of injury secondary to the trauma. If these traumatic responses last longer than a few weeks, there may be reason for concern and it may be time to seek help.

Preparing for disasters and effective intervention can be difficult and complex, but extremely valuable. A number of references, including a *Family Readiness Kit*, are available at [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)

If you have questions regarding these, or any other issues, contact your pediatrician.

Dr. Edward Bailey is chief of pediatrics at NSMC North Shore Children's Hospital, on staff at MassGeneral Hospital *for* Children, former board chairman of the Massachusetts Children's Trust Fund, and a father of three. For more information, you can contact him at NSMC North Shore Children's Hospital, 57 Highland Avenue, Salem, MA 01907 or at [ebailey@aap.org](mailto:ebailey@aap.org).