

Suggestions for Those Helping Children Displaced by Natural Disaster

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1. Physical needs are of priority:

Water, food, warmth, medical care, a way to get clean. Sometimes overlooked: protection from aggressive people (adults or children). Also often overlooked: a quiet, dim place to sleep and enough time to sleep, with regular sleeping hours if possible. Please don't make children wait to pee or poop: scared kids sometimes need to go in a hurry.

2. Keep this important psychological goal in mind:

That the child's memories of this experience will help the child know that there are trustworthy and kind people, and that it is possible, with help, to handle hardship.

3. Be honest with the child.

Many people are tempted to lie to children to keep them from feeling bad. What's at stake: if the child hears reassurance that turns out to be false, the child may develop trouble trusting anyone who says that anything is OK. If there is uncertainty about what has happened to a child's loved ones, "I don't know; I wish I could tell you for sure," is better than "They are doing fine." If there is bad news for the child, it should not be put off too long.

4. Tones of voice are important.

A kind and caring tone of voice is probably more important than the specific words that are spoken. If you are helping to calm a child, speak with low pitch, soft volume, and slow tempo. Sad children need to hear some enthusiastic and positive tones of voice at least some of the time.

5. Help people make friends.

The best defense against fear and grief is having friends. See if you can get children talking with each other and playing with each other. See if the older

ones can take younger ones under their wing. If you suggest to kids that they take on the mission of supporting each other, they just might come through. Let them have time away from television. Let the young ones have toy animals and toy people to do pretend play with. Try some cooperative games, that give them a common goal.

6. Listen.

When children talk with you about what has gone on, don't feel that you need to give them advice or solve all their problems. It's easier to be kind if you don't feel that your job is to make everything right. Sometimes "I'm glad you're talking about this, tell me more," is the best message to give. Sometimes the kindest thing to do is just to nod and keep listening.