



Ensuring a safe and secure homeland for all North Dakotans

■ Helping Children Through the Flood

Floodwaters bring with them a sense of emergency and fear that can severely disrupt the lives of children and their families. Young children are particularly at risk during these times because of their deep sense of vulnerability, their lack of understanding and their difficulty in communicating how they feel. Older children are affected too. Like their younger siblings, they might find it difficult to express their feelings. They may be terribly frightened of the implications of the adversity on their future. Here are a few suggestions for helping children through these difficult times.

■ Make time for your children.

The tremendous stress of adversity can be terribly distracting for adults. Who has time to comfort a child when the floodwater is rising and the basement filling with water? Just a moment of your time, a gentle hug or a reassuring word may be all children need to feel more safe and secure in an emotional situation.

■ Speak simply and honestly about the situation.

Take a few moments to explain to your children what is happening to your family. Use simple words they can understand. Be honest. With a preschool child use words like, "Jenny, we have to leave our home for a while because the water is getting higher and higher and is going to come into our house. So we cannot stay. We are going to Aunt Mary's house for a while." Do not sugar coat a grim situation. Do not exaggerate. Keep children informed of a problem that will directly affect them.

■ Maintain rituals of comfort.

Dinnertime at the kitchen table, a bedtime story, an afternoon nap, or a favorite teddy at bedtime provide young children with a sense of security. Older children have their own rituals too. Watching TV in the afternoon or visiting with friends provides a similar sense of stability. Crisis activity and relocation can cause severe stress with any person because of the disruption of the familiar. Identify these rituals of comfort for children and do what you can to maintain them during disruptive times.

■ Reassure children about the family's safety.

Because they find it difficult to understand complex situations, young children can easily exaggerate their normal fear of being separated from their parents. Reassure children with statements like, "Maria, yes, the water is dangerous. But

you and Mommy and Daddy and your little brother will be safe. The Red Cross will find us a safe place to stay until the water goes back down."

Talk with children about how you feel and suggest a positive response. Say something like, *"Mommy feels very sad about leaving home. Very sad. That is why I am crying. I could use a hug."* Giving children something to do makes them feel a part of the family response to the adversity.

- **Put words of acceptance to your children's feelings and experiences.**

Say something similar to, *"It's okay to cry, Tommy. Taffy (the family pet) will come back to our house when we return too. She will be fine at Uncle John's. He will take very good care of her."* You do not have to "fix" how the child feels. Be a good listener and supporter.

- **Look for masking behavior.**

Children, especially young children, will express how they feel through their actions. Nightmares, physical aggression, bed wetting, stomach distress, and increased clinging and crying are signs of stress. Older children can have difficulty maintaining attention, have problems at school, become withdrawn or get into trouble. These actions are messages that a child is frightened and bewildered.

- **Give children something productive to do appropriate for their age.**

Make them a part of the family's effort to respond to the adversity. Helping make sandwiches or carrying water or filling a sandbag (at their pace) helps children feel a part of their family. Keep them involved in a safe way. Everyone at almost any age can have something productive to do during a crisis.

- **Show children models of courage and determination.**

- Draw children's attention to those within and outside of the family who face the adversity. *"Daddy is doing all he can, Mary. He was up all night putting sandbags around the house. Our neighbors are doing the same. We are all working together."*
- Take time to calm yourself.
- Take a brief break from the crisis. Take a two-minute walk to cool off and calm down. Try for just a few moments to relax mentally. You will be able to provide more support to your family if you do.

- **Seek professional support if needed.**

If your child is having difficulty adjusting then seek professional support. Severity and persistence are two significant concerns. If slight melancholy turns to deep depression or simple acting out turns to cruelty then intervention is needed. If relatively simple responses to stress endure over time then seek assistance.

Keeping children informed, supporting them emotionally and getting them involved in the family's response to the adversity will keep the family together as they struggle to manage a difficult situation. Pulling together through adversity will strengthen the family in ways that will last long after the crisis is resolved.

Source: NDSU Extension Service - <http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/disaster/flood/helpingyourchildrethroughtheflood.html>