CHILDREN’S REACTIONS TO DISASTER

A disaster, whether community wide or involving only a single family, may leave children especially frightened, insecure, or upset about what happened. They may display a variety of emotional responses after a disaster, and it is important to recognize that these responses are normal.

How a parent reacts will make a great difference in the child’s understanding and recovery after the disaster. Parents should make every effort to keep the children informed about what is happening and to explain it in terms that they can understand.

The following list includes some of the reactions you may see in your child:

- Crying/depression
- Bed wetting
- Thumb sucking
- Nightmares
- Clinging/fear of being left alone
- Regression to previous behaviors
- Fighting
- Inability to concentrate
- Withdrawal and isolation
- Not wanting to attend school
- Headaches
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Excessive fear of darkness
- Increase in physical complaints

Some things that will help your child recover are:

- Hug and touch your child often.
- Reassure the child frequently that you are safe and together.
- Talk with your child about his/her feelings about what’s happened. Share your feelings too, carefully. Give information the child can understand.
- Stick with your routine. If you have to change it, explain why.
- Spend extra time with your child at bedtime.
- Try to spend extra time together in family activities to create pleasant memories.
- If your child is having problems at school, talk to the teacher so that you can work together to help your child.
- Help identify coping skills. “Talking seems to help you figure out what to do when things are confusing and scary.” “Coloring seems to calm you down.”
- Be hopeful, emphasizing opportunities to help others.
- Limit TV viewing.

Usually a child’s emotional response to a disaster does not last long. Be aware that some problems may not appear immediately or may recur months after the disaster. Talking openly with your children will help them to recover more quickly from the loss. If you feel your child may need additional help to recover from the disaster, contact your School Counselor.