

# How to Help Children After a Natural Disaster

Devastating natural disasters can have significant, long-term impacts on children and families. This is especially true in an event like the catastrophic flooding in the Hill Country, where so many children and adults experienced tragic losses.

These events can be difficult to discuss, but parents and caregivers have the power to influence how their children will cope simply by the way they communicate with them in the immediate aftermath of the event and in the weeks that follow.

These tips for parents and caregivers are called “The Six S’s” and are designed to support children ages six and older.

**1. Safety and security:** After a natural disaster, the ability to provide a sense of safety and security to children becomes even more critical. It can help to remind them that the adults in their lives are there to protect them and to distinguish between “kid worries” (doing homework) versus “adult worries” (how to keep kids safe). It can also be helpful to point out the things that children can control such as what they choose for breakfast and who they want to spend time with.

**2. Simple and straightforward language:** Even with the best of intentions, caregivers may err on the side of providing too much information to kids, which can be overwhelming, or providing too little information, which sends the message that it’s not okay to talk about what is happening. Meeting children where they are at, such as using age-appropriate language, is helpful. Caregivers can let their children guide the conversation by saying something like, “I know it can be scary when a storm hits, especially after what we went through in the recent floods. What questions or worries do you have for me?”

**3. Supervision:** As helpful as it is to provide children with factual, simple information on a “need-to-know” basis, the news can be overwhelming and frightening for adults and children alike. Younger children may perceive that the event is happening all over again when they see repeated footage on television. It is important for caregivers to monitor the information that their children are receiving. Caregivers can also watch the news with their children, answer questions they may have, and turn it off if it becomes too detailed or distressing.

**4. Structure:** When the world outside feels chaotic or out of control, children benefit from having a familiar structure to their day. It is obviously more difficult to do this when children are not in school, or when homes have been damaged by a storm, but caregivers can also remind children of the things that have “stayed

the same” since the storm to help promote a sense of normalcy.

**5. Social Support:** Social support is a powerful protective factor during times of stress. Helping kids find ways of connecting with friends or family, whether in person or by phone calls, texts, and email, can be especially important after a natural disaster.

**6. Self-Care:** Caregivers are understandably consumed with ensuring that their children are safe, but that can come at a cost when it involves putting aside their own well-being. To best care for their children, adults should ensure sure that they are getting the support they need. This can include making time to get together with their own friends, exercising, taking breaks from work or other stressors, or reaching out to a therapist.

Caregivers can also be on the lookout for signs that their child may need a higher level of support from a mental health professional. In the immediate aftermath of a natural disaster, many of the following behaviors are considered normative. However, if the behaviors persist beyond a month or two, caregivers may want to reach out to a trauma- or grief-informed therapist. These behaviors include:

## **In younger children (ages 6 to 11):**

- Excessive clinginess and separation anxiety
- Behavioral regressions like sleep issues, eating, and toileting
- Behavioral outbursts and tantrums
- Excessive tearfulness and crying

## **Among older youth and adolescents (ages 12 to 18):**

- Social withdrawal
- Aggression
- Risk-taking behaviors
- Self-harming behaviors
- Expression of suicidal ideation

Learn more at [tagcenter.org](https://tagcenter.org) and visit our [Virtual Learning Library](#) for resources and information.

These guidelines were developed by the Trauma and Grief Center at the Meadows Institute. For more information, please contact:

**Julie Kaplow, PhD, ABPP,**  
Executive Director of the TAG Center, at [jkaplow@mmhpi.org](mailto:jkaplow@mmhpi.org)

 **THE HACKETT CENTER**  
TRAUMA AND GRIEF CENTER

MEADOWS MENTAL HEALTH POLICY INSTITUTE