

Helping Children Through the Anniversary of a Devastating Tornado

Whenever something terrifying or tragic has happened, the anniversary will serve as a strong reminder, renewing early reactions and feelings and increasing worries about something similar happening again. As the anniversary of the May 2011 Tornado approaches, there may be increased media attention, warnings, rumors, myths, and misconceptions that can easily add to these worries.

What to look for

Children may react to the anniversary of a traumatic event in a variety of ways, depending upon their age, developmental level, and previous experience with trauma and loss. Children can be agitated, anxious, withdrawn, or even aggressive. Young children tend to express fears at home, such as fears of sleeping alone, or worry about the safety of their loved ones. School-aged children can demonstrate very specific new fears and avoidant behavior related to what they now perceive as risky situations. In the case of major disasters or school-related events, adolescents may spread rumors or manufacture prophecies of impending danger or threat that is shared among their peer group. They can also respond to an anniversary with more reckless, acting out behavior. For some children, the anniversary could renew concerns about personal safety and fears of recurrence. Children may even have hesitations about attending school around the time of an anniversary. For some, the anniversary of a tragic event may evoke a range of personal feelings of loss.



How can you help?

- **Anticipate reminders related to the anniversary and help children recognize and learn to cope with them.** A child may not be fully aware of what he or she is remembering and may react with increased distress without knowing how or why the anniversary of the tornado is triggering those feelings. By understanding children's specific traumatic reminders, adults may be able to help them to react less strongly and cope more successfully.
- **Let children acknowledge the anniversary in their own way.** Some children may express considerable interest, while others may choose to ignore the anniversary altogether. Don't force children to participate in ceremonies or memorials, or overload them with information. Take your cue from your child. There is no one right reaction. However, parents should make themselves available to talk to children about their thoughts, fears and feelings if and when they are ready.

- **Be honest with children.** It's OK to share your own reactions and concerns. Kids learn by watching their parents. When grown-ups are holding back, they can usually tell. Some children will ask, "Could it happen again?" It's best to answer such questions as honestly as possible. One approach is to tell children that lots of people are working very hard to make the country and all the people as safe as possible, but that there's no way to absolutely guarantee or promise that there will be no future storms or tornados.
- **Share any concerns you may have about your children during this period of time with teachers or school personnel so that they can offer additional reassurance and be alert for signs of distress.** Most schools will be dealing with the anniversary in one way or another. Talk to your child's teacher and find out what they have planned.
- **Repeated exposure to traumatic images on television may heighten children's anxiety and distress.** Try to limit your child's exposure to such scenes. It will be important to make sure that young children understand that what they may see on television is a replay and not another tornado. Consider contacting local television stations to suggest they limit the use of this kind of footage.
- **Provide children with opportunities to make a positive difference in their daily lives and in their community.** Taking constructive action is an antidote to fear and helplessness. Families, schools, and communities can use the anniversary as an occasion to strengthen ties and renew shared values. Some children may be interested in writing a story or poem or drawing a picture about the events of last year.

The events of the May 2011 tornado were serious, and our responses to the anniversary are legitimate, normal reactions to the seriousness of the original event. If a child's responses (e.g. nightmares, recurrent thoughts or fears) have been getting worse instead of better over time, consider seeking a referral to a trained and qualified mental health professional.

Caregivers, Remember to Take Care of Yourself

Caregivers have a tendency to neglect their own needs during a crisis. To take good care of the children, adults must take good care of themselves. Here are some things for caregivers to keep in mind:

- Take care of yourself physically. Eat healthily, get enough sleep, drink plenty of water, and get proper medical care.
- Support each other. Parents and caregivers should take time to talk together and find ways to meet each other's needs.
- Put off major decisions. Avoid making any life-altering decisions during this stressful post tornado period.
- Give yourself a break. Try not to overdo cleanup activities. To reduce injury, avoid lifting heavy items or working for extended periods.

Adapted from the website of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Using Play to Help Children Cope

Ways to Make the Wind Fun Again

- **Blow Bubbles Outside.** You can make your own bubbles at home by mixing together 1 cup water, 2 tablespoons light Karo syrup or 2 tablespoons glycerin, and 4 tablespoons dishwashing liquid. To make your bubbles colored, mix 1 cup granulated soap or soap powder, 1 quart warm water, Liquid food coloring. Dissolve soap in warm water. Stir in food coloring until desired color is attained. Give each child a can about 1/3 full of mix and a plastic straw to blow the bubbles.
- **Fly a Kite**
- **Make a Homemade Windsock.** You can download a variety of patterns for your windsock by visiting <http://www.dltk-kids.com/crafts/insects/m-butterfly-windsock.htm>
- **Watch a Pinwheel spin in the wind.** You can download the pattern and instructions for making your own pinwheel by visiting <http://www.pinwheelsforpeace.com/pinwheeltemplate.html>

Using Music

- **Dance to Music.** Children will enjoy the freedom of moving their bodies independently to the beat of their favorite music.
- **Draw, color, or paint while listening to music.** Children will often display what stresses them the most through their artwork. Providing them with supplies to make their own creations allows them the opportunity to express how they are feeling and can help adults get insight into what is really bothering them. Talk about their artwork with them. Instead of asking them what it is, ask them to tell you about their picture.

Provide Opportunities for Sensory Play

- **Have Play Dough available.** Pounding and kneading play dough can be a great way to relieve stress and anxieties. You can make your own Non-edible Kool-Aid play dough with just a few items from your kitchen. You will need: 1 cup flour, ½ cup salt, 1½ Tbsp cooking oil, 1 small package unsweetened Kool-Aid (6 g pkg), and 1 cup boiling water. Mix flour, salt, oil and Kool-Aid. Add boiling water; stir and knead until cooled and smooth. Store in a plastic bag or airtight container. This lasts well for a couple of months if stored in the fridge in a plastic bag.
- **Make Squish Bags.** In a large or small freezer bag, fill with styling gel, hair conditioner, shampoo, or Karo syrup. Add your choice of accessories- glitter, sequins, small plastic animals, old buttons, coins, etc. Using clear packing tape, tape all 4 sides. Place that freezer bag inside another bag to add extra leak protection. Children will enjoy squishing the bags to find their treasures inside!
- **Make Shaving Cream Pictures.** Give child a large piece of aluminum foil and encourage them to smear shaving cream around on the foil. They can use their finger to draw or write about their feelings.

- **Make GAK/Flubber!** Mix 2 parts Elmers Glue with 1 part liquid starch. Add food coloring if desired. Mix well in a cup using a plastic spoon. As it becomes stringy, you can place the mixture into your hands and play with it!

Look for Children's Books to Help Children Identify and Explore Feelings and Emotions

Your local library will be a great resource for checking out children's books. Children relate to characters in books and the pictures and thoughts can be meaningful to them. Children can explore various feelings and emotions, learn ways to cope, and can then apply those concepts to their lives. Here's a list of children's books to get you started:

- The Feelings Book by Todd Parr (Ages 3-8)
- Feeling Happy by Ellen Weiss (Ages infants -3)
- Glad Monster, Sad Monster by Ed Emberley & Anne Miranda (Ages infant-5)
- The Grouchy Ladybug by Eric Carle (Ages 1-6)
- How Do I Feel? Como me siento? by Houghton Mifflin (Ages infant-4)
- How I Feel Silly by Marcia Leonard (Ages 2-6)
- If You're Happy and You Know it! by Jane Cabrera (Ages 3-6)
- Little Teddy Bear's Happy Face Sad Face by Lynn Offerman (a first book about feelings)
- Sometimes I Feel Like a Storm Cloud by Lezlie Evans (Ages 4-8)
- Today I Feel Silly & Other Moods That Make My Day by Jamie Lee (Ages 3-8)
- What Makes Me Happy? by Catherine & Laurence Anholt (Ages 3-6)
- When I Feel Frustrated by Marcia Leonard (Ages 2-6)
- Lizzy's Ups and Downs by Jessica Harper (Ages 3-9)
- My Many Colored Days by Dr. Seuss (Ages 3-8)
- On Monday When It Rained by Cheryl Kachenmeister (Ages 3-8)
- Proud of Our Feelings by Lindsay Leghorn (Ages 4-8)
- See How I Feel by Julie Aigner-Clark (Ages infant-4)
- Smudge's Grumpy Day by Miriam Moss (Ages 3-8)
- The Way I Feel by Janan Cain (Ages 3-6)

