



Helping Children Cope With Evacuation

Evacuation can drastically alter your life, challenging basic assumptions about predictability and control over your life. Evacuations often involve several components that on their own would be difficult: giving up possessions, leaving behind friends (without necessarily having the chance to say good-bye), abandoning pets, and foregoing any number of planned activities. Evacuation may include leaving behind a spouse or parent. Children leave schools.

Children's reactions to evacuations depend on many factors, such as their experiences leading up to and during the evacuation; their temperament; the living situation once in the safe haven or back in the home country; and—especially—*how their parents react to the situation*. This handout is designed to give you some tips to help your children cope with evacuation.

Typical Reactions of Children

In general, how children react to distressing events varies with age. Children may display strong emotions and/or unusual behavior. This is very common. Here are some typical reactions of children to evacuations:

- **Preschool:** Behavioral problems such as aggression, changes in eating/sleeping habits, nervous mannerisms, separation anxiety, regression in areas such as toilet training or language, play acting of the evacuation events, and periods of sadness.
- **School age:** Behavioral problems that commonly occur at pre-school age, distrust, stomach aches, lack of impulse control, rebellious behavior, angry outbursts, social problems, school phobia and depression.
- **Adolescent:** Depression and sadness, anxiety, self deprecation, apathy, disenchantment, acting out, concentration difficulties, withdrawal, anger, nightmares, flashbacks, diminished interest in activities and foreshortened future.

Helping Your Children Cope

As disruptive and distressing as an evacuation may be, *most children will recover in a supportive and safe environment*. So what can you do to help your children cope?

- **Talk to your child.** Let children know it is okay to be upset, sad or angry. Help your children express themselves and answer their questions. Children usually want to know why bad things have happened. Parents should ask them what they want to know and answer their questions without giving them more

information than necessary. Talking to children is a balancing act between honesty and protection.

- **Reassure them** that you will be there and will take care of them.
- **Limit media coverage** of the events that prompted the evacuation. While you may be hungry for information about the situation, media coverage can increase fear and anxiety in children.
- **Structure your children's environment** so that it is as "normal" as possible. Go back to routines, familiar foods and regular bedtimes. Enforce normal rules. Activities and routines from pre-evacuation lives are a source of familiarity, comfort and a key to healthy adaptation.
- **Give children choice and power** appropriate to their age. Children lose control over their lives in an evacuation and parents can help them re-gain control by providing age-appropriate choices. For example, children can decide what to wear, what to eat or what recreational activities they want to do.
- **Make your four walls a home**, no matter how temporary. Buy a few flowers. Put up photos of friends and family. Cook favorite foods.
- **Create positive experiences to balance negative ones.** Putting good things back in children's lives reminds them (and you!) that the world can be a good place.
- **Accept any help offered.** Social support is one of the most important determinants of recovery after difficult events. Evacuees are in a difficult situation and need help. Because an evacuation affects the whole family, family members are less able than they normally would be to help each other cope with problems. Help outside the family becomes especially important. Be willing to ask for and accept help from friends, colleagues and strangers.
- **Manage your own reactions.** How children react to and cope with an evacuation is strongly influenced by their parents' reactions and behavior. This has been a distressing experience for you too, but you will be most helpful to your children if you remain calm and rational. When parents are too upset to talk to their children—when they have not come to grips with their own emotions over the events—someone else probably should take on this role. If parents need to talk these issues over in order to establish some control over them, they should seek the counsel of a friend, family member, mental health professional or religious leader.

Everyone will have some days that are better than others. However, a series of bad days with no signs of normalcy is usually an indicator that something more serious is happening. Crying, withdrawal, aggressiveness in play, words, art, writing, etc., regression are normal in small amounts, but if it continues it might be wise to seek additional support. Do not hesitate to seek out the USAID Staff Care Center for assistance.

There is no question that evacuations can be disruptive and distressing for families. But it is important to remember that evacuations can have positive effects as well. Families who have been evacuated may developed a heightened awareness of risk and therefore live more safely. A deeper sense of family cohesion may emerge. Children may develop increased understanding and empathy for those in difficulty. By accessing one's own resilience and external resources and support, it is possible to adapt and even thrive.