

FOR PARENTS & EDUCATORS

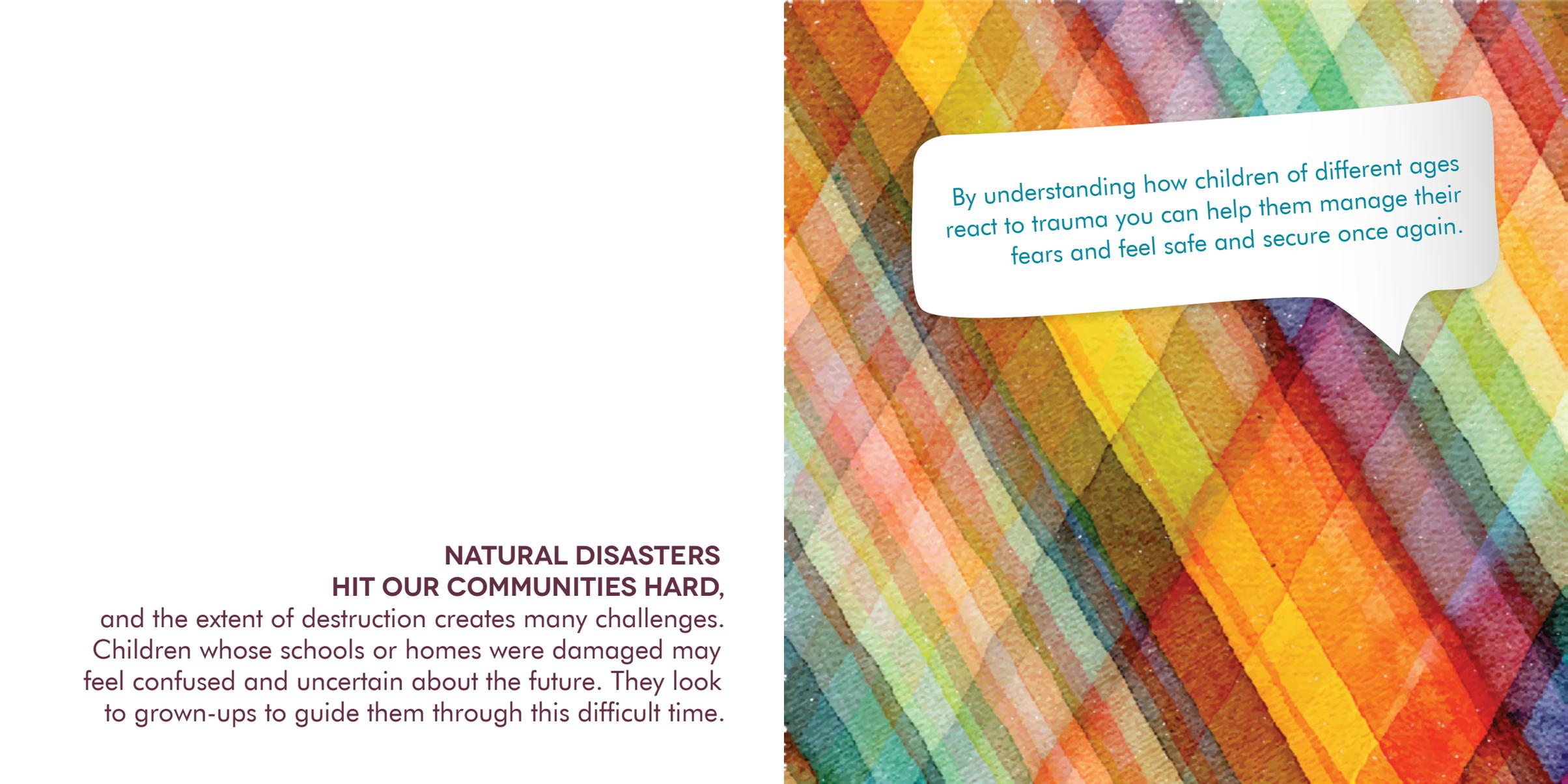
# HOW TO HELP CHILDREN FEEL STRONG

HELPING CHILDREN COPE  
AFTER NATURAL DISASTERS LIKE  
HURRICANES AND FLOODS



**NATURAL DISASTERS  
HIT OUR COMMUNITIES HARD,**

and the extent of destruction creates many challenges. Children whose schools or homes were damaged may feel confused and uncertain about the future. They look to grown-ups to guide them through this difficult time.



By understanding how children of different ages react to trauma you can help them manage their fears and feel safe and secure once again.

# REACTIONS BY AGE GROUP

## PRE-SCHOOL (0-5)

The damage caused by natural disasters may frighten very young children who may feel unsafe. Most children in this age group don't have the words to express their fears. Often they copy the behavior of the adults around them; for example, if their parent or teacher seems worried, they will likely become worried too. Typical reactions include:

### TYPICAL REACTIONS INCLUDE:



- Acting like a younger child (thumb-sucking, bedwetting and clinging to parents)
- Becoming afraid of the dark, refusing to sleeping alone
- Crying more often and more easily
- Developing a fear of being left alone or fear of strangers
- Stuttering or not speaking clearly
- Showing signs of anxiety, fear and sadness
- Thinking that something they did caused the disaster

### HOW YOU CAN HELP:

- Reassure your children and provide physical comfort by giving more hugs
- Avoid unnecessary separations
- Keep to basic routines such as family meals and reading bedtime stories
- Allow your children to sleep in your room, for the moment, or stay in your children's room until they fall asleep
- Encourage your children to talk about their feelings
- Acknowledge that you have feelings of sadness and loss
- Allow children to express their feelings through play
- Limit media exposure about the disaster

## SCHOOL AGE (5-11)

School-age children have a better understanding of lasting change or loss. Feelings of fear and anxiety are common at this age, and they may act out or misbehave to get attention from parents and teachers. Children worried about the disaster may work through their concerns by talking about it so much that it may get in the way of normal play and studies. Children who were trapped during the storm are at higher risk of suffering from stress.

### TYPICAL REACTIONS INCLUDE:

- Whining, clinging, acting like a younger child
- Displaying aggressive behavior such as hitting and kicking
- Losing interest in schoolwork
- Wanting to stay home and skip school
- Getting into trouble with classmates
- Sleeping badly or having bad dreams
- More medical complaints such as stomachaches & headaches
- Worrying or talking nonstop about the disaster/safety

### HOW YOU CAN HELP:



- Be patient and develop a tolerant attitude
- Encourage talking and playing out thoughts and feelings
- Provide creative outlets to help relieve tension (drawing, modeling clay, or writing a diary)
- Explain that your child's reaction is normal, ("Anyone experiencing/hearing this would be upset")
- Listen to children's repeated telling or questioning of the disaster
- While your child is upset, relax expectations at home and in school
- Set gentle but firm limits for acting-out behaviors
- Rehearse/discuss safety measures for the future

## ADOLESCENTS (12–18)

Peer reactions are especially significant in this age group since teenagers tend to copy each other. Adolescents may demonstrate a combination of child-like and adult reactions to trauma. Teenagers may act out by courting danger in an attempt to gain control over an event which is out of their control. Often this age group may have trouble controlling their emotions, as well as opening up to their families.

### TYPICAL REACTIONS INCLUDE:

- Falling behind in schoolwork
- Rebelling at home or in school
- Becoming easily upset or agitated
- Withdrawing and losing interest in usual activities
- Showing signs of sadness or depression
- Feelings of inadequacy or helplessness

### HOW YOU CAN HELP:



- Make additional time for your child and allow for open exchange
- Provide structure but don't make excessive demands, easing up on chores or responsibilities at home and in school
- Encourage discussion of experiences during or after the traumatic event with peers and adults
- If adolescent doesn't want to talk, don't force the issue. Allow for the expression of questions, doubts and feelings such as "it's not fair."
- Encourage them to take part in social activities or peer group activities
- Encourage them to help in community rebuilding
- Practice safety measures for future disasters

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## MORE WAYS PARENTS & EDUCATORS CAN HELP

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- Regulate your emotions. Children are good at sensing the emotional reactions of the adults around them.
- Acknowledge your feelings of fear, anxiety and sadness. This helps children label and identify their feelings.
- Let your children know how you are managing your feelings; for example; "When I am feeling scared, what helps me is to ....."
- Provide accurate information to children, in age-appropriate language, if they ask about what is happening.
- Try not to tell your child/student, "Don't be upset." Instead validate their feelings by saying, "I can see that you are upset" and ask, "How can I help you feel better?"

- Help your child recall an earlier situation when he or she had to be brave. Ask, "Remember when you were worried about X,Y or Z situation, what did you do then that made you feel better?" If the child can not, you can gently suggest, "what if we try..."
- Some children may become frightened by the reactions of their caregivers, who may not be coping well after the hurricane. Help them talk about their concerns, and find caring adults they can turn to with their worries. Reassure them that things are hard for many grown-ups now, but with time it will get better.
- For children who talk about their fears of a future hurricane, don't say that this will never happen. Tell them, "We can work together to keep you safe. Let's think about what we would do if this happened again." You may need to explain what steps you, your child's school, the government, etc. are taking to keep your child and the community safe in the event of a future hurricane.
- Provide classroom activities that allow children to find meaning or mastery over the trauma, such as a discussion of ways in which they are now stronger, or making a collage that highlights losses and gains after the disaster.



WHAT DOES  
**OHEL'S**  
**TRAUMA**  
**TEAM**  
PROVIDE?

### **OHEL TRAUMA SERVICES**

meets the immediate needs of individuals, families and communities affected by trauma. Leveraging decades of Specialized Trauma Treatment Services in many communities, OHEL provides outreach, counseling, education, and referrals to individuals and groups affected by trauma.

**FOR OVER  
3 DECADES,  
OHEL HAS  
BEEN A  
LEADER IN  
PROVIDING  
TRAUMA  
SERVICES  
TO THE  
COMMUNITY.**

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## **TRAUMA SERVICES INCLUDE**

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- Community wide intervention
- Crisis intervention
- Training
- School-based services
- Private bereavement counseling

**INDIVIDUAL CRISIS COUNSELING** OHEL provides emotional support to individuals seeking to understand their responses to trauma, to manage stress, identify and develop healthy coping strategies.

**GROUP CRISIS COUNSELING** OHEL offers support groups to the community affected by the disaster including: family members and friends of the displaced, youth groups, senior citizens, teachers, administrators, and others in the community seeking to share experiences and provide support to one another.

**EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS & PRESENTATIONS** OHEL gives presentations on the range of responses to trauma in order to strengthen healthy coping skills, and place a focus on wellness, stress-management and resilience. OHEL gives presentations to organizations, schools, community centers and houses of worship on topics related to the impact of trauma from natural disasters.

**OUTREACH & EDUCATION SERVICES** OHEL participates in health fairs, community events and programs, and welcomes individuals interested in our services.

**REFERRALS FOR ONGOING SERVICES** Referrals are made for those individuals who require outside treatment or services beyond the scope of the program.



## STRENGTHENING THE COMMUNITY

OHTEL Children's Home and Family Services meets the diverse and growing social service needs of the community. With over 48 years' experience, and serving the entire lifespan, OHTEL's reputation of clinical expertise, service excellence and loving care are well recognized by both the community and regulatory authorities.



**FOR MORE INFORMATION ON OHTEL TRAUMA SERVICES**  
PLEASE CONTACT OHTEL ACCESS AT 1-800-603-OHTEL  
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