



*From inConfidence™, your Employee and Family Assistance Program:*

## **HOW TO HELP CHILDREN DEAL WITH NATURAL DISASTERS**

In light of the damage caused by the floods in your region, children, like adults, may be feeling anxious and worried about the consequences of this event. While not all children and adolescents will be affected to the same degree, be watchful for signs of emotional distress which can range from a vague sense of insecurity, persistent anxiety to more severe, troublesome behaviour.

Those children most directly affected by the disaster are more likely to experience negative and distressing emotions which they may find difficult to express or control. Children who are naturally more timid and immature as well as children susceptible to depression may also need additional support to cope with the aftermath of this natural disaster.

Depending on the child's age and maturity, you might observe the following reactions:

### **Children 5 and younger**

- Preoccupation with unsettled weather (i.e. rain)
- Fear of separation from parent or guardian
- Crying and sudden tantrums, excessive whining, clinging behaviour
- Regression to past behaviour, such as thumb sucking, bedwetting, fear of the dark

### **Children 6 to 12**

- Fear of going out to play alone
- Unusual silence and withdrawal from family and friends
- Sleep disturbance and nightmares
- Irritability
- Stomachaches and other physical complaints with no accompanying medical explanation
- Regressive behaviour (i.e. sibling tension, diminished attention in school)

### **Children 13 to 18**

- Intensified mood swings
- Flashbacks, nightmares
- Difficulty expressing fear and anxiety
- Fluctuations in their need to be alone versus a need for constant reassurance
- Difficulties at school
- Changes in conduct, such as rebelliousness, or other challenging behaviour



### What parents and guardians can do

- Reassure your child that events like these are extremely rare. You might say, *"This is a really difficult time for many people. Fortunately, events like these don't happen often."*
- Children need to know the facts – appropriate to their age. Knowing the personality of your child, you are best able to judge what would be most helpful for them to know.
- Do not dismiss or minimize children's feelings. Reassure them that their feelings are a normal reaction to an abnormal situation. (Example: *"You are still feeling worried and scared. - Lots of people feel like you."*)
- Children need to know that they are safe. Reassure your children that you are there to take care of them.
- Help your children express their thoughts and feelings about the event in concrete ways, e.g., conversations, art/drawings, journal writing.
- Speak truthfully to your children. Give them clear information about what has been accomplished to date and what remains to be done. Use simple language and less detail with young children.
- Return to family activities and routines as soon as possible. Familiar routines reinforce children's sense of security.
- For younger children, try to limit exposure to media coverage and monitor their use of the internet.
- If you are unsure of an answer or how to respond, be honest. Simply say, *"I don't know" or "I feel that way too"*.
- Involve your family in community support, where possible.

Above all, **listen, listen, listen**. Do not pressure children to talk to you about their feelings and fears but assure them that you are available if/when they are ready to talk to you. Let children know that you can get someone for them to talk to who will make them feel comfortable and safe– counselor, teacher, family relative or friend.

### **The Benefits of inConfidence™, your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP)**

Sometimes just talking to a professional EFAP counsellor can help you and your child regain a healthy perspective on the traumatic event you've just experienced. EFAP is a free, totally confidential service available to you 24 hours a day, seven days a week. You can reach us anytime by calling us at **1-866-347-2067**.

Visit our online services at [www.inconfidence.ca](http://www.inconfidence.ca)