

**Suggestions:** Protective behavior is one way in which a child may try to control their feelings of helplessness and fear. Actually, when this occurs they are denying their own feeling responses. Validate their loving protection but explain to them that it is also okay to be a child who needs loving care. Give them a role model to follow. Actions speak louder than words to children so share your tears, anger, and helplessness openly.

Children have a delayed response to loss, so it may be months before any of these feelings are expressed or even manifested. This is normal. A child may appear to be coping well immediately following an earthquake and then suddenly regress over a small aftershock two months later. It may take awhile for them to begin to feel safe in their world again.



A United Way Agency

## Information to Share with Children

- One of the safest places to be during an earthquake or aftershock is in a school building.
- If you are at school when an earthquake happens remember that teachers are experts in what to do in case of an emergency.
- Researchers recommend mentally commanding the quake to stop during the course of an earthquake or after-shock. Keep repeating this command until the shaking stops. For many people, this mental activity reduces stress during and immediately following the shaking.
- Aftershocks are to be expected. Though aftershocks may be severe, they are not expected to be as strong as the original earthquake.
- Immediately following an earthquake or aftershocks, hugs can really help us feel safe again.
- Everyone will need opportunities to talk and listen to others. Parents, teachers, and friends, will want to hear about your feelings.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions and to talk about your feelings-your friends are probably feeling the same things you are.
- Get plenty of sleep and eat nutritious food.
- Bring a stuffed animal to school to be an "earthquake buddy."
- Remember that no matter how big an earthquake is, your family or community will take care of you.

## Helping Children Cope After a Major Earthquake



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"I was really scared at first... then it was kind of fun. Then, when we had more earthquakes, I didn't think it would ever stop. I wanted to sleep with my Mom and Dad. I only felt safe in a room with a table to hide under."  
Child, age 9 – San Jose

Children will experience a variety of emotions during and after an earthquake. **It is normal for them to experience a wide range of emotions.** They may want to retell their experiences over and over again or they may refuse to discuss it at all. The following are common behaviors seen in children after an earthquake along with suggestions for ways that adults can support them.

### **Withdrawal**

After an earthquake a child may refuse to interact with individuals or join in activities.

**Suggestions:** Gently set up a time to talk with the child. Let the child know that you understand how difficult it can be to share feelings. Engage in some physical expression such as drawing together or playing with stuffed animals or puppets. Talk about what you are feeling or how you might feel in their situation. Explain that their feelings of anger, sadness, guilt, embarrassment, relief, and love are normal.

### **Belligerent Behavior**

Some children will "act out" after an earthquake. They may act belligerent and tough, or they may be unwilling to cooperate with home or school activities.

**Suggestions:** Often when a child is angry or belligerent it is because they feel helpless or hurt inside. Their tough behavior is an attempt for them to feel stronger, and therefore more safe.

Set up a time and place to talk with the child individually. Do not embarrass or humiliate the child in front of others. Point out that the child is going through a difficult process right now in words that they can understand. Share the impact the child's behavior has on you. Explain that they may be alienating others who could support them.

Do not be afraid to ask the child direct questions. Many children, including teens, may not even know why they are angry. Talk to them about your personal experiences with loss and anger. Above all, help them understand that they have a right to their feelings.

### **Depression**

Some children may become depressed after an earthquake. Their eating or sleeping habits may change. Their behavior may be less energetic or even despondent. Depression can even occur many months after the earthquake.

**Suggestions:** It is very important to discuss signs of depression directly. Depression is a natural part of trauma, but if strong feelings are not resolved it can move to an extreme state that drastically lowers the child's ability to function. It is important to focus on living one day at a time and ask what the child needs right now to get through the day

addressing specific needs, feelings, and issues will lessen the overwhelming "dark cloud." Limit your child's exposure to overwhelming television news coverage.

### **Regressive behavior**

A child's behavior will often regress following an earthquake. They may need to be held constantly. They may be especially fearful and wish not to be alone. Regressed behavior is a very normal stress response in children after an earthquake. Even teenagers may be frightened to sleep alone or may need the light on.

**Suggestions:** Again, it is important to reassure the child, let them express their fears, and allow them to ask questions. It is important to be clear and honest with them. Make no promises you cannot keep. Keep as much consistency in their schedule as possible. Physical touch can also be very reassuring.

Let them know that there is a plan and a system of family and community support to keep the child safe. It's okay to allow the child to regress a little, then gently move back into a normal routine, step by step, as your child feels comfortable.

### **Protective Behavior**

A child may try to protect themselves and you by acting strong and grown up, They may try to appear unaffected by their situation.