Helping Children to Cope Before a Disaster Strikes

Your family may realize clearly after a disaster what should have been done. But, whatever the crisis - fire, tornado, flood, etc. - some thought and action beforehand can usually help the members react more wisely. Consider not only how your children might react in a disaster, but what your own reactions might be and the effect of that crisis upon each person's emotional and physical well-being. Unstressed by the tension of a real emergency, a person is better able to think through actions and reactions to crisis situations.

Giving children familiar patterns to follow and basic information and supplies for meeting a variety of possible situations may result in, at most, life-saving skills or, at minimum, a lessening of the impact of crisis situations. Talking, practicing, and actively preparing together can play a part in helping make the unknown more familiar.

You can discuss possible reactions to potential disaster situations at informal times during the day - bedtime, snack time, or when doing chores together. You might even consider it a type of game that includes activities to practice various responses. Keeping children posted on what is going on and answering their questions simply and honestly can prepare both parents and children for possible future difficulties.

Check news stories of family or community problems and emergencies. Talk over how your family would handle the situations. This gives your children the time to think out and plan actions for real life crises.

Help children practice dialing 911, and rehearse what to say during the call such as their name, address, and directions to your home. (Be sure to not actually call 911 during this practice!) Encourage your children’s teachers to discuss and re-enforce emergency response activities.

With preschoolers play a game of "Let's Pretend ... " Discuss a disaster situation that might arise in your area and then ask, "What do you do?"

Try a family game of "Escape." On five or six slips of paper, write down various places where a fire might be located in your house. Put them in a jar or in a hat. On five or six other slips of paper, write down various rooms in which you might happen to be. Put them in a second container. Pull a slip from the first jar locating the fire. Have each family member take a slip from the second jar, locating each person in the house. Players must then figure out how to escape and how to help those who may be trapped.

Stock a box or prepare a “go-bag” with games, books, and hobby materials for sitting out family difficulties or emergencies. Consider that in some emergencies there could be limited lighting, so plan some of your preparedness activities to help your children to cope with the dark.