

## A Child's Reaction to Disaster

Below are some common physical and emotional reactions in children after a disaster or traumatic event:

### **Birth to 2 Years**

- When children are pre-verbal and experience a trauma, they do not have the words to describe the event or their feelings. However, they can retain memories of particular sights, sounds, or smells.
- Infants may react to trauma by being irritable, crying more than usual, or wanting to be held and cuddled.
- As children get older, their play may involve acting out elements of the traumatic event that occurred several years in the past and was seemingly forgotten.

### **Preschool - 2 to 6 Years**

- Preschool children often feel helpless and powerless in the face of an overwhelming event. Because of their age and small size, they lack the ability to protect themselves or others. As a result, they feel intense fear and insecurity.
- Preschoolers cannot grasp the concept of permanent loss. They see consequences as being reversible.
- In the weeks following a traumatic event, preschoolers' play activities may involve aspects of the event. They may reenact the incident or the disaster over and over again.

### **School-Age - 8 to 10 Years**

- The school-age child has the ability to understand the permanence of loss.
- Some children become intensely preoccupied with the details of a traumatic event and want to talk about it continually. This preoccupation can interfere with the child's concentration at school and academic performance may decline.
- School-aged children may display a wide range of reactions - guilt, feelings of failure, anger that the event was not prevented, or fantasies of playing rescuer.

### **Pre-Adolescence to Adolescence - 11 to 18 Years**

- As children grow older, their responses begin to resemble adults' reaction to trauma. They combine some more childlike reactions with others that seem more consistent with adult reactions.
- Survival of trauma can be equated with a sense of immortality. A teenager may become involved in dangerous, risk-taking behavior, such as reckless driving or alcohol or drug use.
- In contrast, a teenager can become fearful of leaving home. Much of adolescence is focused on moving out into the world. After a trauma, the world can seem dangerous and unsafe.
- A teenager may feel overwhelmed by intense emotions, and yet feel unable to discuss them with relatives.

*Information courtesy of the American Red Cross and the University of Illinois.*