

Tips to Help Families Support Their Children ...families helping families stay safe...

Family to Family Health Information & Education Center of Florida

You have been told that a hurricane might be heading right for your home...what are you going to do? How will you help your children prepare? How can you help with their fears? These are just a few questions that may be going through your head in addition to your own emotions and responsibilities in preparing your home, protecting your property, full filling job responsibilities, and keeping yourself safe from harms way. Below are a few simple tips to help you support your children and youth during difficult times.

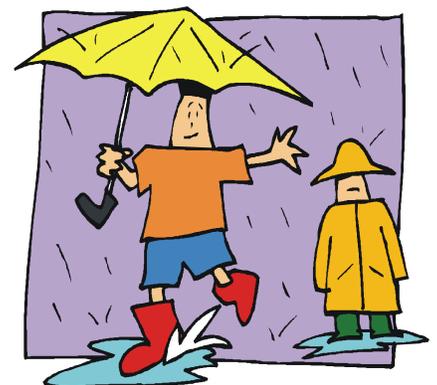
1. Don't get caught up in the "hype"



The potential for a disaster is great opportunity for media to increase their audience. There is a difference between "information" and "entertainment". Children (and adults for that matter) do NOT need to be entertained when they are facing a potential disaster. It increases their anxiety, concern, and fear. They need information that will help them make wise choices concerning their safety. Constant exposure to drama that is presented as information for the purpose of entertainment can cause serious emotional issues for children. Limit your family's time in front of the television and tune in for regular updates and alerts, such as at the top of each hour, just long enough to know what you need to do to protect yourselves.

2. Have a plan and know what you will do

It is the unknown that frightens most people. Most children and youth are more disturbed about what they think might happen than by reality. Planning that addresses each level of impact is easier for children. For example, you might have a plan for a Tropical Storm, another for a Category One Hurricane, and then one for each category of storm. By sharing these plans and letting your children know what you will do and when, you are giving them something to use to fight their fears. Posting and referring to them when discussing the storm and answering questions can give them a sense of security and make them feel more in control.



3. Talk on a level that your child can understand

Children of all ages will know or sense that something is about to happen. They may be old enough to know or they see and hear the concern and anxiety in your voice. Older children should be included in developing the family plan. They should also be encouraged to develop their own plan about things important to them, such as how they will contact friends when it is over, what they will do with their possessions, and how they will occupy themselves should they have to evacuate or exist for some time without electricity. Younger children can help you pack things such as flash lights or preparing water bottles. This should all be done in a calm and matter of fact manner. Infants and young children may not understand your words, but take the time to hold them and whisper in their ear how much you love them and that you will always do your best to care for them. Singing and playing games they recognize can help them stay calm.



4. Give them information that they need



When a child asks how bad the storm is, you can compare it to others they may have experienced. If they see devastation on the television (refer to tip one) and ask if it may do that to their home, instead of guessing what it might or might not do, answer them by discussing what you will do **IF** it is that bad. Have them talk about what they think they could do to help protect themselves and their belongings. Remind them that you will all be together, someplace. Talk about the plan and where you will be. If they ask where the storm will hit or ask if it is coming to your home, answer by redirecting them back to where it is now and what we know about where it will be later today. Do not answer their questions with “I don’t know”. Do not lie...but only tell them about what you are fairly certain. There is no use in getting them scared about something that may change, as these storms tend to do.

5. Keep to your routines and regular schedule

Routines reinforce to children that things are OK and will be staying the same for a while. They are comforted by doing what they are used to doing. It is important to integrate preparation into regular schedules (like ball practice, church, work, chores, etc). This helps them understand that “life goes on”. Their fears and behaviors related to being scared will be much less when they can count on what will happen next. When it gets to the point where you can no longer follow these routines because of the weather, build new routines that relate to your planning and response to the storm.



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