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HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH HURRICANE HARVEY

FOR PARENTS

Natural disasters obviously cause a lot of stress for everyone involved, including fears of safety, disruption of daily routines, significant financial loss, and in some cases loss of pets or family members. Stress can be acute (happening during the event), and some stress can be long-term. Helping children process the events leading up to, during, and after Hurricane Harvey will increase the chance that they are able to effectively adjust and be happy.

WHAT TO EXPECT:

- It is **NORMAL** and **EXPECTED** that your child will show some emotional and behavioral changes for a few weeks after Harvey. These may include:
 - a. Sleep problems, including difficulty falling or staying asleep, bad dreams.
 - b. Increase/decrease in appetite
 - c. Increase in anxiety/worries, more fearful, not wanting to be alone or be away from family members
 - d. Problems with concentration
 - e. Physical complaints (headaches, stomach aches, "I don't feel good")
 - f. Developmental regression (bedwetting, "baby talk")
 - g. More irritable and less patient, argumentative
 - h. More easily upset by small things
 - i. More quiet and withdrawn

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP:

- *Take care of yourself:*

It is very important for parents to make sure they are taking care of themselves, physically and emotionally. If you are a mess, how can you help your child? This doesn't mean that you can't show any negative emotions or stress. It does mean that you should be able to also show your child how to communicate and manage those emotions in a healthy manner. In other words, **BE A POSITIVE ROLE MODEL.**
- *Become "child-centered" as much as possible:*
 - Even though things may be busy and chaotic, both mothers and fathers need to make a conscious effort to spend more one-on-one time with their child.
 - Be extra patient with them.
- *Don't stay silent, or pretend it was "no big deal":*

Some parents may be concerned that if they try to talk to their child about Harvey it will cause more distress and trauma. However, like most adults, children are better able to adjust to (and cope with)

stressful events when they are provided with accurate information. In general, NOT TALKING about Harvey will do more harm than good. If your child is upset about Harvey, staying silent won't make that anxiety/fear go away, and may actually make it worse. They will seek out information on their own, or jump to their own (incorrect) conclusions about what happened. Also, you don't want to send the message, "We don't talk about difficult things.", or "How you feel isn't important." Talking about Harvey will help your child process what happened, ensures that their information and conclusions are accurate, and teaches them that communicating and sharing how they feel with others is important. Don't worry about potentially saying the wrong thing.

- *How to talk about Harvey:*
 - Take the initiative to start the conversation, because if you leave it up to your child they might not.
 - Try to talk about Harvey, even if they are reluctant or downright refuse. However, don't force the issue or keep pestering them after a few initial attempts. Let them know that you are always available to talk if they change their mind or have anything they want to share.
 - Start by asking the child what they remember about Harvey, including:
 - Sequence of events (what happened)?
 - How they felt at different times?
 - What was the worst or most difficult part (or parts) of Harvey for them?
 - Was there anything that happened that was actually fun or exciting?
 - Do they have any fears or worries about the future? (next few months/long-term)
 - Do they know what aid workers, police, etc. did to keep them safe, and to help others?
 - Is there anything else they think you should know about?
 - You have to actually listen.
 - Encourage them to talk, and don't interrupt.
 - Don't minimize or invalidate their fears/concerns and perspective (don't send the message they shouldn't be upset or worried, etc.), or else they will think you don't understand/care.
 - Pay attention to their nonverbal communication.
 - Correct any misunderstandings or inaccuracies, and provide additional information to fill in any gaps.
 - Tell them that any problems that Harvey caused, or may cause in the future, are not their fault. Even though this seems obvious to us as parents, children can have a tendency to blame themselves.
 - Reassure your child that you understand how they feel, and those feelings are normal. They are not alone, and their thoughts and feelings about Harvey are just like other children.
 - Be straightforward and specific with explanations, and don't expect your child to make inferences about things you don't address directly.
 - Explain things at a level they can understand. Information related to your family and your child's day-to-day activities will make the most sense to them. Older kids need more information, younger children need less.
 - Have them explain things back to you so you can be sure they understand.
 - Don't be focused only on the negative, and try to find some positives. As strange as it sounds, being able to identify anything positive that has happened as a result of Harvey can increase the chance of healthy coping.
 - Encourage their questions, and answer them in a truthful manner (even difficult ones).
 - It is normal for children to keep asking the same questions. Sometimes this happens because they did not understand your answer, or they are seeking reassurance. Be patient with this.
 - Don't provide false assurances of safety.
 - It is OK to tell them they are safe now, and natural disasters like Harvey are rare. However, don't ignore reality by saying it will never happen again, etc. Instead, focus on what people are doing or planning to keep your child safe.

- Share your experience with your child.
 - Without making it “all about you”, share some of what you experienced during Harvey (worries, difficult times), but also what you are doing to cope or adjust to those experiences.
- Encourage ongoing/evolving discussion.
 - It is unlikely that you will talk with your child once about Harvey and be done forever. You are simply starting the conversation, and letting your child know that they can talk about it in the future at any time.
 - “Checking in” every once in a while over the following months is a good idea.
- *Planning for the future:*
 - Establishing short-term goals/plans for the next few days can make things more predictable. Include your child in this discussion. Come up with a list, which can include family/parent goals (e.g., cleaning up, new living arrangements, etc.), and goals specific to your child. Make a list and cross them off when completed, so your child can see the progress that is being made.
 - With your child, develop a safety plan for future natural disasters or other events, including what to do if you become separated or hurt. This might include meeting places, how to communicate if apart, other trusted adults, etc.
- *Re-establish routines as much as possible:*
 - This is an obvious one, but it can be easy to overlook or hard to implement with all the disruption and things that need to be taken care of after Harvey. The morning and bedtime routines are some of the most important, because they create a stable/predictable start to the day, and promote restful sleep.
- *Helping others:*
 - Allowing your child to help others in need can give them a sense of importance/value, increase their empathy for others, and show them that they can “fight back” against Harvey.

WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP:

Following stressful/traumatic events, most children gradually adjust and return to their “usual self” over the course of 3-6 weeks. In general, they tend respond better to natural disasters (hurricanes, flooding) than intentional disasters (terrorist attacks). However, some children may have difficulty with this process, and need professional intervention. Particularly at risk are children who live in high-conflict families, who have also experienced other traumatic events in the past, or who had emotional, behavioral, or learning problems before Harvey. Listed below are some red-flags to look for. If parents have any concerns, or if they seeing something problematic that isn’t listed below, they are ALWAYS encouraged to follow up with their pediatrician or a mental health professional.

- Any behaviors listed in the “WHAT TO EXPECT” section that are:
 - severe and/or causing significant disruption in daily activities, or
 - getting worse over time, rather than better, or
 - continue to be present 4-6 weeks after Harvey.
- Any of the behaviors listed below that are occurring 4-6 weeks after Harvey:
 - Intrusive thoughts
 - Your child has frequent/recurrent distressing memories or nightmares of Harvey.
 - Your child has strong or sustained emotional reactions to things (places, noises, activities, etc.) that remind them of Harvey.
 - “Flashback” events, during which your child acts as if Harvey is reoccurring.
 - Your child has episodes when things “don’t feel real”, or they are in a daze and seem to lose awareness of what is happening around them.

- Your child shows significant avoidance of thoughts, discussions, places, or activities that might remind him/her of Harvey.
- Changes in mood
 - Your child seems depressed or sad more often than not, and/or has trouble experiencing or expressing happiness.
 - Low motivation to do fun activities.
 - Negative/critical beliefs about him/herself, others, or the future.
 - Wanting to be alone, more quiet and withdrawn.
- Changes in reactivity or thinking
 - Extreme irritability and angry outbursts (temper tantrums).
 - Easily startled, “jumpy”.
 - Overly focused on making sure things are safe, excessive lookout for danger.
 - Memory problems (in particular a lack of memory for events surrounding Harvey that they experienced).