

# Supporting Children and Youth Through a Severe Storm

## For Caregivers

The damage and life disruption caused by hurricanes and other severe storms can create feelings of stress, anxiety, grief, and fear. The length of recovery depends, in part, on how frightened people were and the extent of the damage and loss in the community. The first priority is making sure that your family has all their physical needs (water, food, shelter, health, sleep) and safety needs (self and loved ones) met during and after the storm. Once the storm has passed, we can look towards emotional, psychological, and social recovery. Recovery occurs over a period of time and is strengthened with the support of family, friends, and organizations. Some families will be able to return to their normal routines rather quickly, while others may benefit from ongoing support.

Children and youth may experience a wide array of emotions connected to a severe storm. Most children will be able to cope with the guidance, support and understanding of their caregivers and other community members. The same general guidelines for supporting children and youth after other types of distressing or overwhelming events apply in this situation.

## Things You Might Notice Before, During and/or After the Storm

Children and youth will react differently depending on their age, developmental level, proximity to the event, and prior experiences. Some typical reactions they may exhibit surrounding a severe storm include the following:

- **Concerns about safety:** Concern or worries about their safety, the safety of others including caregivers, relatives, friends, and pets.
- **Separation anxiety:** It is normal for young children to want to stay close to a safe adult when they are frightened. Extended difficulties with separation anxiety beyond the storm can be a sign more support is needed.
- **Changes in behavior and emotions:** You may notice children having one or more big emotions associated with the storm. This is normal. For some kids their response to scary or overwhelming events won't look like fear or grief, it might look like distraction, aggression, anxiety, helplessness, confusion, hyperactivity, impulsivity, etc. Some kids may show their distress by acting out or becoming very quiet. Teens may engage in more risk taking as coping mechanisms.
- **Expression of physical ailments:** Children may complain of headaches, stomachaches, or general pain.
- **Changes in daily functioning and overall wellness:** Children may show changes in general functioning at school or work or extra-curriculars. They also may show changes in sleep, exercise, and their eating habits.
- **Possible preoccupation with storms:** Some children might start to talk about or play out storms, they may also be increasingly sensitive to thunder, lightning, wind, or rain for a while. Teens may feel climate anxiety.

## Things You Can Do

Children tend to follow the cues of the adults around them, consequently their functioning and recovery will be influenced by how their caregivers cope. To assist children, caregivers can:

### Before the Storm

- Remember that children do best when caregivers appear calm and prepared. The most important message caregivers can convey is that they are prepared and will be there to protect their children and keep them safe. Having storm essentials and games or crafts on hand (that don't require electricity) will help keep everyone calm.
- Access the provincial *Emergency and Disaster Preparedness Website* for information on how to prepare for emergency alerts and tips on how to prepare your home and family for a storm:

<https://novascotia.ca/emergency-education/>



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## During the Storm

- Provide accurate, age-appropriate information to children about what is happening during the storm. Try to avoid having adult conversations (i.e., distressing details, financial concerns) in front of children.
- Let them know it's okay to be frightened, sad, or angry. Validate their feelings and reassure them that you're there to support them.
- Help children to regulate their emotions with comfort (e.g., cuddles), exercises (e.g., breathing, grounding, yoga) or regulation items (e.g., colouring pages, fidgets, a ball). Help them choose positive coping strategies (e.g., journaling, music, art, games, reading, etc.).
- If the child/youth is acting out, try to stay calm and show understanding. Avoid punishing them for their reactions but you can still set limits on behaviours that are not okay or safe. Let them know that talking may help and that you are there for them.
- Monitor and limit children's media and social media exposure about the storm. Talk to them about any concerning information or misinformation they learn.

## After the Storm

- Reassure children that the storm is over and that they are safe and that you and their other loved ones are safe. Young children may benefit from additional support at bedtime.
- Answer any questions children may have following the storm.
- Explain to them (in simple terms) any changes to daily life (temporary or long term) that will result from the storm so they know what to expect. Otherwise, keep as normal a routine as possible.
- As a caregiver give yourself time to process what has happened and look after your own emotional and physical needs. Take some time out for yourself and connect with supportive adults.
- To the best of your ability, be prepared for future storms. Work together to develop a family storm safety plan. Document and communicate this plan. Have it readily available.
- Connect with loved ones. Remember that relationships with family and close friends are crucial as they form the foundation of your children's world.
- Some children, especially older youth, may want to contribute to local community support and resiliency efforts and activities. This can help restore a sense of community, resiliency, purpose, and control.
- Seek additional help for yourself or your children if changes or reactions worsen or if they persist. Access your local health, mental health, and community services.

*Adapted from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)*

For more information on common age-specific trauma reactions among children and youth:

[https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/age\\_related\\_reactions\\_to\\_traumatic\\_events.pdf](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/age_related_reactions_to_traumatic_events.pdf)

For past resources developed by the Trauma Informed Care Team at IWK Health for helping children and youth cope with traumatic events: <https://yourexperiencesmatter.com/resources/new-resources/>

## Need help now?

**Emergency:** 911

**Nova Scotia Mental Health and Addictions Crisis Line:** 1-888-429-8167\*

**Kids Help Phone:** 1-800-668-6868 or text CONNECT to 686868\*

\*These hotlines are toll-free. In an emergency you can also go to your closest emergency department.

## Need mental health and addictions services?

**IWK & NSH Mental Health and Addictions Central Intake:** 1-855-922-1122\*

\*Self-referral

