When a natural disaster occurs in the community, it will affect every member of that community or household in a variety of ways. It is important for parents to take a moment from the immediate needs that must be met and talk with their children.

Regardless of age, children are vulnerable during these events and need the help and support of their parents. Parents often wait until it is convenient for them to talk to their kids about difficult topics, but it is actually best to talk to children when their anxiety demands a response. Time spent giving your children a reassuring word or a hug will go a long way toward creating a sense of security.

When parents do not discuss the disaster with children, they communicate that these things are so horrible that even adults dare not talk about them. When children are stressed, they often express their feelings through actions rather than words. Often these actions are regressive and inappropriate. This may include bad dreams, stomach aches, and nightmares, anxieties about situations incidental to the disaster, clinging to the parents, requests to sleep near the parents, and regressive behavior such as thumb-sucking and bed-wetting.

In older children, you may notice fighting, withdrawal, difficulty in concentrating and paying attention, poor performance in school, or feeling very tired. If your child acts differently or behaves in unacceptable ways, try to comfort and reassure her or him. Make the assumption that the behavior is in response to stress. Be aware of the extra attention and affection your child may need during this time.

**TIPS FOR TALKING WITH CHILDREN OF ALL AGES IN A CRISIS:**

**ASK QUESTIONS AND LISTEN**

This is especially important with teens. It is important for parents to talk with teens before they get overly stressed because teens could fall into a state of depression or hopelessness. Ask them (in private) what is bothering them or start a discussion with a statement such as, “You seem down lately.” Do not downplay their worries, and don't try to cheer them up or tell them they shouldn't worry. Instead of trying to solve their problems, let them know you are there to help them find a solution, or to just listen.
BE AVAILABLE AND “ASKABLE”

Not talking to children about the flood or what is happening to the families involved can convey that the subject is off limits. Be open to talking about it on the child’s level. Be a good listener so children express their worries and questions. Don’t worry about having all the answers.

SHARE YOUR FEELINGS

Tell them about your own concerns but don’t overwhelm them. Talking about your feelings makes it easier for them to share feelings.

SUPPORT CHILDREN’S CONCERN FOR PEOPLE THEY DO NOT KNOW

News media outlets throughout the nation report on disasters, so other people in children’s lives may call and talk to them with their concern. Acknowledge this level of caring from people who are far away.

LOOK FOR FEELINGS BEYOND FEAR

Children need some reassurance, but don’t stop there. Continue to be open to talking about the disaster and progress that has been made. Encourage children to express other emotions such as anger or questioning why this would happen. Children can eventually tire of hearing about the disaster, especially when they aren’t directly affected. Talk about what is currently happening with those you know and what others need from a distance.

REASSURE CHILDREN

Children who have experienced a natural disaster worry about the future. They wonder if there will be enough money for food and clothes and if/where their family will have to move. When your children ask questions about the future, try to respond in a way that is truthful and makes them feel secure.

Although parents would like to protect children from all the disasters and bad things that occur in today’s world, no one can do that. It is important for all adults in the lives of children to remain open, honest and available.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

www.extension.umn.edu/flood
Fact sheets and videos with research-based tips on immediate and long-term flood issues

Flood Information Line: 1-800-232-9077, fil@umn.edu
For questions about water, crops, horticulture, and climatology issues

AnswerLine: 1-800-854-1678, answer@iastate.edu
For questions about cleaning, stains, mildew, and food safety issues

Source: Kathleen Olson, family relations educator, University of Minnesota Extension