

EARLY CHILDHOOD (3 - 5 YEARS OLD)



Families play a critical role in helping to reestablish a sense of normalcy and safety for a child before, during and after a disaster occurs. Please take a moment to read through these suggestions on how to support your child.

MY MILESTONES:

(Levine & Munsch, 2016)

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT:

- **New Complex Emotions:** I am starting to learn about and feel emotions like embarrassment, guilt, and shame. I am also learning how to make other people laugh.
- **Awareness of Others:** I am beginning to realize that my actions affect other people (especially when I hurt someone). Please gently remind me that I need to apologize and should feel sorry for hurting someone.
- **Quality Time:** Spending time with my family and other safe, trusted people is one of my favorite things to do.
- **Friendships are Forming:** I am beginning to develop friendships with other children around my age. I am learning about sharing toys and playing nicely with other people.
- **My Empathy is Not Well-Developed:** It can be challenging for me to understand that others may be feeling, seeing, or thinking about something differently than I do. I may appear selfish, but I am not trying to be mean. I can only really understand things from my own perspective and experiences right now. Please keep teaching me patiently.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT:

- **I Have Energy:** I am probably able to run around, hop on one foot, climb, spin in circles, skip, and somersault. I love being active.
- **Screen-Time:** Please limit my access to screens (TVs, tablets, phones, and other devices). I need to experience the world with all of my senses (touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing) so that I can learn, increase my coordination, and become aware of myself and how I impact people and things. Also, I will sleep better at night when I have been active during the day.
- **“Fine Motor” Skills:** These are skills that involve using my hands and fingers in small, precise ways. Everyday I am getting better at holding crayons and pencils, eating with small silverware, zipping my jacket, and doing other movements with my fingers and hands.
- **Sleep:** I may not like taking naps or having “quiet time” each day, but it is important for me to rest and sleep since that is when my body is growing and recovering from each day’s activities. I need about 11 to 12 hours of sleep per night.

COGNITIVE (BRAIN AND LEARNING) DEVELOPMENT:

- **Learning Through Play:** I can learn so much when I play. For example, I practice caring for others and showing emotions when I play with baby dolls or stuffed animals, I learn about construction and balance when I build things with blocks or Legos, and more.
- **Lots of Questions:** I ask you a lot of questions so that I can learn about the world. If I do not ask, I may not find out the answer.

- **Routines Help:** I thrive and feel more confident when life follows a routine and I know what to expect each day (like regular times for meals, play, napping, and going to bed at night).
- **Creativity is Blossoming:** I may start using toys in both unique and typical ways (for example, a block could be a telephone or a piece in a tower). I feel proud of how my brain is creative and thinks of new things. It means a lot to me when you tell me how proud you are of me and my efforts.
- **Imagination:** My brain is creative and I probably have a vivid imagination. You may see this when I play, build, do arts and crafts, and sometimes even during routine tasks each day when I start doing silly things.

MY RESPONSE TO STRESS:

- **New Behaviors:** I might seem more disobedient, naughty, sneaky, or mischievous than before the disaster occurred. When I feel stressed, I may have poor behavior, too.
- **Attention-Seeking:** I may seek even more attention than usual. I need to be reminded, not just with your words but also your actions, that I am loved and safe with you.
- **Attitude Changes:** I might be more aggressive, moody, tearful, or irritable with people or things. Also, I can feel when you are stressed, which can make me feel stressed, too, and I have a hard time expressing what I feel inside. I may show my feelings through my emotions or actions (like crying or screaming).
- **I May “Regress”:** I may act younger or show some immature behaviors, like sucking my thumb, wetting the bed, needing diapers again, etc. You may not have seen me display these behaviors in a while, and this is called “regression.” It may last for a few weeks to a few months. After a traumatic event, my mind can have a hard time dealing with what has happened, and it is often too hard to do the new, “big kid” skills I have learned.
- **Imagining the Worst:** Given that I have an active imagination, I may feel guilty or think that I caused the disaster or traumatic event because of something that I did, or that the disaster is a punishment to me (for example, I may feel like I caused the disaster event because I was mean to my friend).
- **Clinginess:** I might be very clingy to you and not want to be separated from you (like when I go to daycare or school, when you go to the bathroom, etc.).
- **Play May Change:** It is possible that I may stop playing altogether for a few weeks to months. Or, when I play, you might see me acting out some distressing situations that resemble the disaster or trauma I just lived through. This is normal because playing through those situations is the best way I know to process what has happened. Once I feel better with what occurred, those play themes should become less frequent.
- **Trouble Sleeping:** I may have nightmares or night terrors (which is when I may be only a little bit awake and screaming/crying for a long time in the night). If I do, please comfort me, sing soothing songs, read calming stories, and stay with me awhile so I fall asleep again.

HOW ADULTS CAN HELP:

- **Keep Me Close:** Please allow me to stay home from school or daycare soon after the disaster or trauma. I may need to be close with you for a few days or weeks. Give me extra snuggles to reassure me that I am safe and loved.
- **Routines:** Please try to keep our routines consistent, including activities, sleep, and meals. When possible, please serve familiar foods at our usual times of the day. My appetite may change temporarily after the traumatic event. Healthy food can help me both physically and emotionally during stressful times of life.
- **Be Attentive to What I Watch:** Please monitor my access to the media, news, and internet on TV and other devices. When I see the disaster on TV, I may think the disaster event is happening

again. Children's programs can be okay, but news or even advertisements can feel scary or contribute to sleeping issues.

- **Creative Expression:** Please provide me with opportunities for fun, play, and creativity (through art, drawing/painting, music, etc.). I need those activities to help me express myself and make sense of what I have experienced.
- **Talk with Me:** When I seem calm and well-rested, ask me what I know about what has happened. Ask me if I have questions. Provide me with simple and easy to understand, but truthful information. Avoid graphic details, descriptions, images, or videos. Please answer my questions so I will not be as likely to ask for information at pre-school, daycare, etc. Similarly, reassure me that the event is not a punishment for me, nor did I necessarily cause it to happen (especially not by being mean or disobedient).
- **Safety Awareness:** Remind me that you and others in the community are doing all you can to keep me safe.
- **Be Patient with My Play:** Please allow my play sessions to continue, even if the theme of disasters or trauma seems concerning to you. If, after a few months, my play does not get back to what it was like before the event, please talk with a healthcare professional.
- **Familiar People:** Please try not to have strangers taking care of me, but rather, family or friends I know well. Now is not the best time to try a new babysitter, because lots of my life already feels unpredictable.
- **Offer Appropriate Choices:** Please provide me with choices, when possible, because that helps me feel more in control of the situation. For example, allow me to choose my own (situation and weather appropriate) clothes to wear on a particular day, what snack I would like to eat, what TV show to watch, etc.
- **Stay Calm:** When talking with other people and I am around, please be aware of your behavior, tone of voice, and choice of words. Keep in mind that I like to copy what I see and hear. When I hear you being upset or angry it might make me act out because I feel afraid or confused. Please know that it is okay if I see you cry. You can remind me that it helps to let out your sadness during these hard times.
- **Watch my Behavior:** If my behavior starts looking again like it did when I was younger, that is okay for a while (a few weeks to a few months). If, after a few months and we are less stressed, I am not regaining my advanced skills (like walking/running, talking, etc.), please speak with a healthcare professional.
- **Schedule Appointments:** Do not forget that I still need my regular well-child check-ups with my doctor and may need vaccinations in order to stay up-to-date.
- **Self Care:** Please take care of yourself. Rest often, eat nourishing foods, drink water, ask for help, and be honest with others about what you need. If you are well taken care of, then you can take even better care of me.

WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP:

- **Hard Questions:** If I am asking questions about the event that happened, and you are not sure how best to answer them, please talk to a healthcare professional.
- **Regression Remains:** If my immature or "babyish" ("regressed") behaviors, like thumb-sucking or having potty-training issues, continue occurring after a few weeks to months, then I need additional support from a healthcare professional.
- **Continued Sleep Issues:** If I have continued struggles sleeping at night (after a few months following the event), like falling asleep, staying asleep, increased nightmares or night terrors, etc., then please speak with a healthcare professional.
- **Play is Still Different:** If my play does not resume looking like my typical types of play or imaginary situations (after a few weeks to months), I need help from a healthcare professional.
- **Extreme Behaviors:** If my behaviors are becoming consistently more aggressive, moody, or irritable, even a few months after the incident, then please talk to a healthcare professional.

(All children develop at their own pace. These recommendations are based on scientific research and trends in child development. Additionally, the information contained here does not constitute medical advice. It is for educational and informational purposes only. Please consult with a healthcare professional to receive personalized advice or treatment for your child.)

REFERENCES & RESOURCES THAT YOU CAN USE:

- American Red Cross - Helping Your Child Cope After a Disaster (2020)
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qA-csgFa8k>
- American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) - Tips on Talking to a Child After a Disaster (2018)
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KANprqSTX2k>
- Center for Disease Control (CDC) - Helping Children Cope with Disasters (2020)
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/childrenindisasters/children-disaster-help.html>
- Center for Disease Control (CDC) - Helping Children Cope with Emergencies (2020)
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/childrenindisasters/helping-children-cope.html>
- Levine, L. E., and Munsch, J. (2016). *Child Development from Infancy to Adolescence*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- FEMA Accessible: Helping Children Cope After a Disaster (ASL) (2017)
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=di6j1XxKC8c>
- KidsHealth. (08/2014). Sleep and Your Preschooler.
 - <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/sleep-preschool.html#:~:text=Preschoolers%20need%20about%2011%20to,habits%20for%20getting%20to%20sleep.>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) - Tips for Talking With and Helping Children and Youth Cope After a Disaster or Traumatic Event: A Guide for Parents, Caregivers, and Teachers (2013).
 - <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/tips-talking-helping-children-youth-cope-after-disaster-or-traumatic-event-guide-parents/sma12-4732>
- University of Nebraska- Lincoln - How to Help Preschoolers Manage Their Emotions After a Disaster (2015)
 - <https://extensionpublications.unl.edu/assets/pdf/g2261.pdf>

BOOKS TO READ TOGETHER:

- *A Terrible Thing Happened* (Margaret M. Holmes, 2000)
 - This book discusses a vague “terrible thing” and how the main character deals with life afterward, and what he experiences (trouble sleeping, feeling unwell, etc. It allows for the reader to decide for themselves what the “terrible thing” has been in their own life.
- *Jenny is Scared: When Something Sad Happens in the World* (Carol Shuman, 2003)
 - This story presents a young girl, Jenny, and her brother after a “sad thing happened.” They do not know nor understand what happened, but they want to find out. They ask trusted adults, and eventually they learn about it. This book demonstrates the importance of being honest with children.
- *The Giving Tree* (Shel Silverstein, 1964)
 - This book presents a tree that gives of itself to other people to help them cheer up and get through life. It conveys the importance of self-care when helping other people through hard things in life.

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