

MIDDLE CHILDHOOD (5 - 11 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:

- **Understanding Others:** My ability to understand another person's perspective is improving as I grow older.
- **Self-Esteem:** I am developing my identity and sense of who I am. I may have high self-esteem sometimes, but it can decrease when I compare myself to other people.
- **Emotions:** Compared to when I was younger, I am getting better at understanding my emotions and talking about them. Now I can identify and state when I am feeling happy, sad, worried, scared, etc.
- **Self-Regulation:** I am most able to regulate and control my emotions when I am in a safe and familiar environment. Support from caring and trusted adults helps me feel more in control of my emotions.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT:

- **Physical Activity:** My health benefits from having many physical activities like playing outside, at a park, or in youth sports. This encourages me to continue living an active life.
- **Nutrition:** A well-balanced diet is important to provide the energy I need for learning and physical activity. Eating healthy foods and maintaining a steady blood-sugar level can help minimize my mood swings and behavioral outbursts.
- **Gross Motor Skills:** My gross motor skills (large muscle skills and abilities) are continuing to improve! This means that my flexibility, balance, agility (how quickly I can move around), and strength are improving. This makes sports easier and more enjoyable.
- **Sleep:** While I do not necessarily nap anymore, it is important for me to rest and sleep enough since that is when my body is growing and recovering from each day's activities. Please prioritize a regular bedtime routine and sleep schedule (I probably need 9-12 hours of sleep at night).

COGNITIVE (BRAIN AND LEARNING) DEVELOPMENT:

- **How I Solve Problems:** I tend to view the world in categories like good versus bad and right versus wrong. My thinking is becoming more logical, flexible, and organized. I am also learning how to solve problems, but may need help with more complex tasks like completing to-do lists.
- **Attention-Span:** This typically increases over the elementary school years. I should be able to focus on one task for a longer period of time than when I was in preschool. However, I can still get distracted by people and things around me when I am working on tasks.
- **Memory:** I am beginning to be able to use strategies to improve my memory and learning. For example, I may repeat a list over and over in my mind or remember someone's name by thinking of someone else I know by that name.
- **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.

- **Cause-and-Effect:** I am learning that one thing (an object, person, etc.) can have an effect on something else. Specifically, I am becoming more aware of how this can occur within relationships and how I behave (for example, when I am mean, then my friend does not want to play with me). This growing understanding, paired with my vivid imagination, can lead me to feeling as though I might have caused the event to occur by a bad action or choice I made.
- **Reading:** This is one of the biggest areas of growth for children in elementary school. Usually 5th graders can read the words on pages, and can actually understand the material on each page.

MY RESPONSE TO STRESS:

- **Fear of Returning to School or Activities:** Returning to school or a more normal routine may feel scary to me. I might struggle with going to school or doing homework for a variety of reasons: I may have an increased risk of being bullied, classmates may have questions about the traumatic event that I am not sure how to answer, or I might worry about being separated from my family or caregivers.
- **Physical Symptoms:** I may have a loss of appetite, headaches, stomachaches, or other physical pain. This can occur when stress, fear, or nervousness are present.
- **Overwhelming Emotions:** Feelings of worry, guilt, or loss over what happened may increase, and my feelings may overwhelm me at times. I could become more moody, angry, quiet, tearful, or disruptive after the traumatic event.
- **Play:** I might reenact what occurred during the event through play (acting out what I saw, heard, or felt in my own way). Play is an important way for me to process the event. I may repeat this pattern of play many times as I try to understand and make sense of what has happened.
- **Feel Guilty:** Depending on what occurred during the disaster, I may feel like I caused the event somehow, or that I should have been able to stop it from happening. That misunderstanding can cause me to feel guilty.
- **Communication Changes:** My ability to effectively express my fears or worries can temporarily decrease when I have experienced stress or trauma. This might contribute to more arguments between us, I may refuse to do my normal tasks or chores, and/or I may struggle to concentrate on my schoolwork or other routines.
- **Lost Interest:** I may temporarily lose interest in the activities and friendships I had before the disaster event occurred.
- **Withdrawal from Others:** Ignoring or declining hugs, kisses, or other physical touch can occur while coping with a recent traumatic event. I may also want to have more time alone doing activities like reading, journaling, or drawing.
- **Changes in Sleep:** After a disaster or traumatic event, I may have more nightmares or trouble falling asleep or staying asleep.

HOW ADULTS CAN HELP:

- **Be Honest with Me:** I am old enough to understand that something bad has happened even if you do not tell me directly. I will cope better if you provide me with honest information about the disaster event using simple language and terms to describe what has happened. The most important thing for me is to learn how I will be safe. Talk with me about how I can help myself stay safe and who is working to keep me safe in the community. Review what unsafe behaviors I should avoid doing. Please discuss our safety plan together and how you and other adults will work to keep our family safe.
- **Offer Appropriate Choices:** Please provide me with choices, when possible, because that helps me to feel more control over the situation. For example, allow me to select which activities I want to do or what clothes I want to wear.
- **Connections with Others:** If possible, please help me to keep in contact with my school, teachers, and friends. These connections will help me to feel more of a sense of normalcy and stability.

- **Misconceptions May Occur:** Gently clarify any misconceptions or misunderstandings that I may have about the traumatic event. I may overhear classmates, teachers, or other people discussing the event that happened. When I only hear parts of the conversation, I may “fill in the gaps” with incorrect assumptions which can lead to more fear and rumors. Or, I may feel as though I caused the event to happen by a bad action or choice I made. Please periodically ask me about what I know about the event, how and why the event started, what I have heard other people saying, if I have questions, etc.
- **Creative Expression:** Please provide me with opportunities for fun, play, and creativity (through art, journaling or drawing, creating music, etc.). I need those activities to help me express myself and make sense of what I have experienced.
- **Predictability:** The unpredictability of a disaster can leave me feeling uneasy, fearful, and nervous. Try to keep as normal of a schedule for me as possible during this time. That will help me to feel safe and as though life is a little more under control.
- **Deep Breathing:** If I am having a moment of panic, a behavior outburst, or something like that, please coach me in taking a few deep breaths with you. That will help the logical part of my brain to reconnect with the emotional part that is working on overdrive.
- **Ensure Good Nutrition:** Eating healthy foods and drinking plenty of water are crucial for my well-being. Maintaining my blood sugar at a consistent level will help to minimize mood swings as well.
- **Let Me Play:** Play-time has many benefits for me! Research has suggested that play should be initiated after a disaster for the most healthy recovery (Kinoshita and Woolley, 2015). Playing is a natural stress-reliever and it allows me to process the disaster event in my own way. However, please do not force me to play; I will begin playing when I am ready and the opportunity is available to me. Likewise, it may take some time for me to enjoy the activities I used to like, so please be patient with me.
 - Encourage me to play and do creative art activities. Having time to play freely and play games with rules can help me to de-stress, process the disaster event, and strengthen bonds with others as we play together. I may not have ideas of what to draw or create, though, so please consider giving me some general suggestions or prompts to help encourage my creativity (for example, “draw how the disaster made you feel” or “draw something that makes you feel happy”). Remember, there is no right or wrong way to engage in play.
- **Validate My Feelings:** As I am getting older, I am becoming better able to name my feelings (for example, happy, sad, mad, excited, nervous, etc.). Instead of ignoring my feelings; please be patient with me and help me to name my emotions. I need to have your continued support in dealing with my emotions. When you allow me to experience my genuine emotions, even when they are big or seem scary, that helps me trust you more. I feel safer if I can honestly share my thoughts and feelings with you. For example, try saying something like, “I see that you are feeling (name emotion) about (name event). It is okay to feel this way! When you feel ready, I would be happy to talk with you about it (either their emotion(s) or the event).”
- **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:

- **Extreme Behavior(s):** If, 6 or more weeks after the event, I continue to show signs of extreme behaviors or behavior problems that are not typical for me, then please help me to stay safe and seek help from a healthcare professional for me.

- **Excessive Withdrawal:** If I spend a lot of time alone or seem emotionally detached or numb when discussing the trauma or the aftermath, then I need support and guidance from a healthcare professional.
- **Self Harm or Violent Actions:** If I show signs of harming myself or others (cutting, biting, etc.), or other risky behaviors, please seek help for me. Expressing my emotions after the trauma is often harder for me than before, so that can lead me to be more physically aggressive or violent as I try to communicate that I have unmet needs. Likewise, I may have more anxiety or panic attacks than usual. If any of these occur, please seek assistance from emergency medical services (if it is a crisis) or a healthcare professional.
- **Depression and/or Anxiety Symptoms:** It is not uncommon for children like me to have increased depression or anxiety-like symptoms for a few weeks after a scary event. But, if it seems like I am experiencing depression or anxiety for many weeks afterward, please assist me in seeking help from a healthcare professional.
- **Significant Changes in Eating:** When life is hard and feels out of my control, one thing that I feel like I can still control is what I eat. You may notice that my eating habits have changed following the disaster or traumatic experience. I may refuse to eat, binge eat (meaning that I eat a lot of food in one sitting), purge/vomit frequently, etc. Please provide emotional support to me and seek help from a healthcare professional if this happens.
- **Unsafe or Risk-Taking Behaviors:** I may show signs of unusual or risky behaviors, including sexual promiscuity or substance use. I will need your guidance to help me through these behaviors as well as guidance from 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-csqFa8k>
- American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) - Tips on Talking to a Child After a Disaster (2018)
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KANprqSTX2k>
- Berk, L. (2021). *Infants and Children: Prenatal through Middle childhood*. Pearson. (Chapter 12).
- Center for Disease Control (CDC). (2020). Before, During, and After an Emergency.
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/childrenindisasters/before-during-after.html>
- Center for Disease Control (CDC). (2020). Sleep in Middle and High School Students.
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/features/students-sleep.htm#:~:text=The%20American%20Academy%20of%20Sleep,10%20hours%20per%2024%20hours.>
- FEMA Accessible: Helping Children Cope After a Disaster (ASL) (2017)
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=di6j1XxKC8c>
- HelpGuide: Helping Children Cope with Traumatic Events (January 2021)
 - <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/helping-children-cope-with-traumatic-stress.htm>
- Kinoshita, I. and Wolley, H. (2015). Children's Play Environment After a Disaster: The Great Eastern Japan Earthquake. Accessed: 1/8/2021:
 - <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4928754/>
- Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services. Chapter 3 - Understanding the Impact of Trauma (2014)
 - https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/#part1_ch3.s2

- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2020)
 - <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/about-child-trauma>
- Thompson, R.H. (2018). *The handbook of child life: A guide to psychosocial care*. Springfield, Ill: Charles C. Thomas.

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.
- *When Something Terrible Happens* (Marge Eaton Heegaard, 1996)
 - "Creates ways for children to explore the fright, confusion, and insecurity caused by traumatic events in their lives. The 'Drawing Out Feelings' series has been designed to provide parents or caregivers, educators and counselors with an organized approach to helping children cope with grief, family loss and change. A workbook to help children work out feelings about a traumatic event." (Amazon.com description)

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