

## **HELPING CHILDREN AFTER A DISASTER**

**David Lowenstein, Ph.D.  
Psychologist**

- The producers of "Sesame Street" will take on some of the difficult issues raised by the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington when the series begins its 33rd season Feb. 4. The premiere episode deals with Elmo's fears after he witnesses a grease fire that breaks out at a lunch counter and the reassurance he receives during a visit with real-life firefighters at a station in Harlem, N.Y.
- A catastrophe such as an earthquake, hurricane, tornado, fire and/or flood is frightening to children and adults alike
- It is important to acknowledge the frightening parts of the disaster when talking with a child about it
- Falsely minimizing the danger will not end a child's concerns – Several factors affect a child's response to a disaster
  - The way children see and understand their parents' response is very important. Children are aware of their parents' worries most of the time, but they are particularly sensitive during a crisis. Parents should admit their concerns to their children, and also stress the ability to cope with the situation
  - A child's reaction depends on how much destruction he/she sees during and after the disaster. If a friend or family member has been killed or seriously injured, or if the child's school or home has been severely damaged, there is a greater chance that they child will experience difficulties
  - A child's age affects how the child will respond to the disaster. It is important to explain the event in words the child can understand
- Following a disaster, people may develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is psychological damage that can result from experiencing, witnessing or participating in an overwhelmingly traumatic (frightening) event

- Children with this disorder have repeated episodes in which they re-experience the traumatic event
- Children often relive the trauma through repetitive play. In young children, distressing dreams of the traumatic event may change into nightmares or monsters, of rescuing others or of threats to self or others
- PTSD rarely appears during the trauma itself, though its symptoms can occur soon after the event, the disorder often surfaces several months or even years later.
- Parents should be on the alert for these types of changes:
  1. Refusal to return to school and “clinging” behaviors, shadowing the mother and father around the home
  2. Persistent fears related to the catastrophe (such as fears about being permanently separated from parents)
  3. Sleep disturbances such as nightmares, screaming during sleep and bedwetting, persisting more than several days after the event
  4. Loss of concentration and irritability
  5. Behavior problems in school or home that are not typical for the child
  6. Physical complaints (stomachaches, headaches, dizziness) for which a physical cause cannot be found
  7. Withdrawal from family and friends, listlessness, decreased activity, preoccupation with events of the disaster
- Professional advice or treatment for children affected by a disaster – especially those who have witnessed destruction, injury or death – can help prevent or minimize PTSD