

TERRORISM AND DISASTER CENTER

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI

Enhancing mental and behavioral health preparedness, recovery, and resilience in children, families, and communities affected by disaster.



Terrorism and Disaster Center
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The National Child
Traumatic Stress Network

Effects of Media Coverage of Disasters Upon Children and Youth

Brian Houston, PhD



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What is a Disaster?

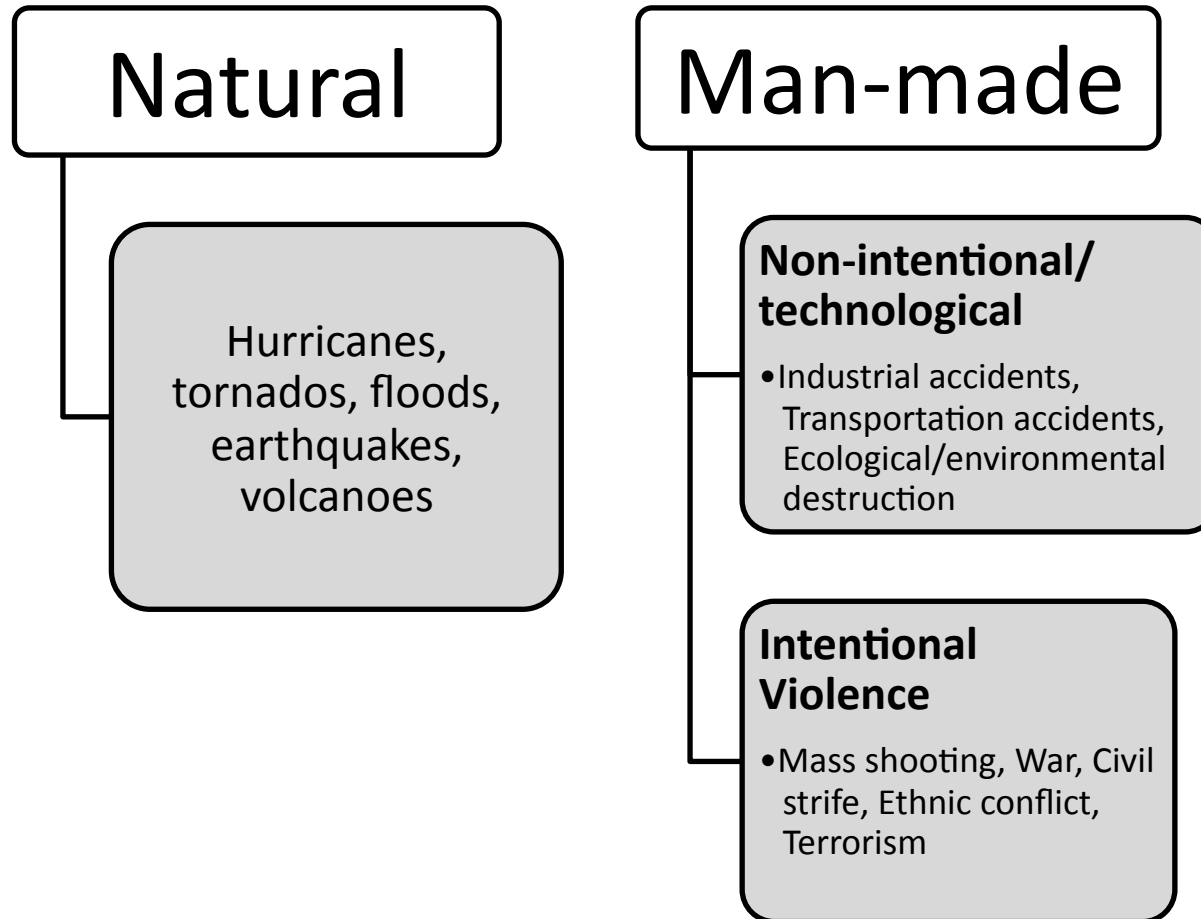


AP Photo

A severe disruption, ecological and psychosocial, which greatly exceeds the coping capacity of the altered community.

-World Health Org.

Disaster Typology



Media and Disasters

- Media often focuses on the most sensational aspects
 - Death
 - Injury
 - Destruction
- Images and video are repetitive
 - Cars overturned
 - Destroyed homes
 - Dramatic rescues



Media at Virginia Tech

Children and Media

- Children exposed to media coverage may experience:
 - Fear
 - Anxiety
 - Distress
 - Repetitive thoughts about the event
 - Sleep Disturbances

Disaster Media

- Past research has shown that disaster media has an effect on children and youth even if they are not directly impacted by the event



Media Coverage Creates a Cycle



Age Impact

- Younger children
 - May not understand that the repeated showings of an event are the same and may think the same thing is happening simultaneously in multiple places
 - May not understand the concept of distance from the disaster

Media Differences

Traditional Media

- Different television stations often show similar images and video clips
- Television is regulated
- If you watch any television coverage, no matter the station, the coverage will be similar enough to be able to generalize to what a child has seen

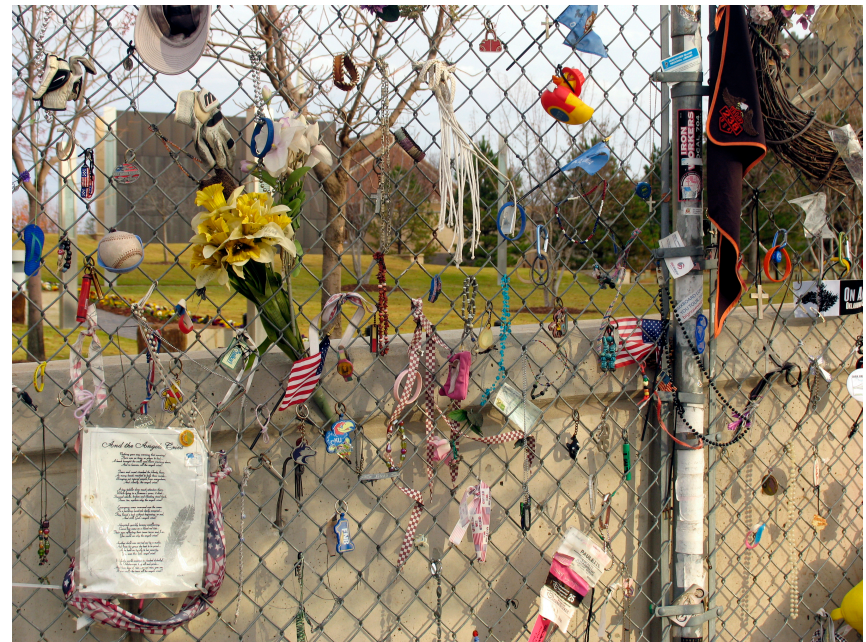
New Media

- Online media is often mixed media where websites may have videos, images, and text in one site
- Each webpage is different due to lack of regulation
- May be impossible to know what is encountered online
- Media can be interactive or social

Oklahoma City Bombing

- Seven weeks after the Oklahoma City Bombing over 2,000 middle school students in Oklahoma City were surveyed
- For children without physical or emotional exposure to the bombing, television exposure was directly related to posttraumatic stress symptomology

(Pfefferbaum, B., et al., 2001)



Two years after the Oklahoma City bombing



- Sixty-nine 6th graders within 100 miles of Oklahoma City
- Almost 20% of those in the sample acknowledged bomb-related difficulty functioning
- This finding supports the hypothesis that media exposure and indirect interpersonal exposure impact posttraumatic symptoms in youth

(Pfefferbaum, B. , et al. 2000)

Two years after the Oklahoma City bombing

- Eighty-eight 6th graders in a community 100 miles from Oklahoma City
- Print media exposure was more strongly associated with posttraumatic stress symptoms than broadcast exposure, however both were found to be significant
- Those with moderate to intense reactions, posttraumatic stress increased with increased exposure to both broadcast and print media coverage
- Students who reported an emotional reaction to the media coverage exhibited more stress symptoms

(Pfefferbaum et al., 2003)



9/11 Media Exposure

- 179 elementary school students who were not directly exposed to the events of 9/11
- Exposure to positive and negative media coverage of 9/11 coincided with higher levels of PTSD symptoms
- Parents rated children who were exposed to images of 9/11 on the internet as having the highest level of posttraumatic stress symptoms compared to other types of media

Saylor, C.F., et al. (2003)

Strategies for Helping Children Cope with Disaster Media Coverage

Jennifer First, MA, MSW, LMSW



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Effects of Media Exposure

- Media coverage of disasters can produce increased fears and anxiety in children
- The more time children spend watching news coverage of disasters, the more likely they are to have negative reactions
- Young children may not understand repeating images of earlier or past events is a replay.
- If a child has directly experienced a disaster, excessive media coverage may interfere with their recovery.



Strategies (for parents, teachers, therapists, child care professionals)

1. Listen
2. Clarify
3. Emphasize Safety
4. Apply Coping skills
5. Reinforce Positive Activities
6. Policies and Preparedness



1. Listen

- Key word is to LISTEN
 - Don't lecture or burden them with information
 - Let their concerns lead and guide the direction and depth of the conversation.
 - If they don't bring the subject up, you can invite the conversation with a question: *"Have you heard anything at school or on the news that you want to talk about?"*
 - Listen for any misconceptions
 - Determine the sources of fear (if any)

2. Clarify

- Helping child/youth understand what has happened or what is happening
 - Clarifying any misconceptions by answering basic questions
- Discuss the nature of the media and news coverage
 - News typically shows the scariest parts and repeats them over and over

3. Emphasize Safety

- Emphasize safety efforts
 - Tell them that adults will do everything they can to keep them safe
 - Don't make unrealistic promises

4. Apply Coping Skills

- Assist in processing emotions brought on by media with coping skills
 - Reinforce coping skills they may have already used: *“Remember the last time you were scared and what you did to calm down?”*
 - Assist with identifying ways to help
 - Examples: Writing cards, donating time or money

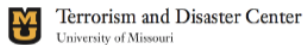
5. Reinforce Positive Activities

- Reminders of the good things happening in the world
 - Positive events happen all the time and may not make the news
 - Reminders of the good work by people during a disaster (e.g. emergency workers, medical, volunteers, etc.)

6. Policies and Preparedness

- Media Policies
 - Active mediation or restriction
 - Being aware of what a child is seeing and placing some limits on how much media coverage is viewed
- Disaster planning and preparedness
 - What are the emergency plans and procedures?
 - Promote family disaster planning (communication plans, disaster kits, family preparedness)

Additional Resources



HELPING STUDENTS COPE WITH MEDIA COVERAGE OF DISASTERS: A FACT SHEET FOR TEACHERS AND SCHOOL STAFF

Disasters can be chaotic, confusing, and frightening events, both for those who experience them directly and for those who learn about them through the media.

Experiencing a disaster directly can cause posttraumatic stress reactions, anxiety, fear, worry, grief, and behavioral problems in young people. Media coverage of disasters can also cause distress in children and adolescents.

This means that young people who live through a disaster may be further upset by media coverage of that disaster, and also that youth living far from a disaster can become afraid or worried by media coverage of a disaster that occurs somewhere else.

This fact sheet provides an overview of how media coverage of a disaster may affect students and suggests strategies that people working in schools can use to address these effects. The strategies described in this fact sheet can be used by teachers, school counselors, school social workers, other school staff members, and school administrators.

MEDIA COVERAGE OF DISASTERS

While each disaster is different, the news media use common practices when covering disasters. These include:

- A tendency to focus on the most sensational aspects of the disaster (such as death, injury, destruction).
- Repetitive use of emotion-stirring images and video (such as buildings burning or cars overturned).

Youth exposure to media coverage of disasters is most likely to occur via TV or the Internet. Therefore, for most of this factsheet we discuss the disaster media coverage that youth "view" or "see" on TV or online. However, students



may also hear about disasters on the radio or read about disasters in newspapers or magazines. Therefore teachers and school staff need to consider students' exposure to disaster coverage in all forms of media.

THE EFFECTS OF MEDIA COVERAGE OF DISASTERS ON CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Because the news media often focus on the most frightening aspects of disasters, viewing disaster media coverage can be emotionally upsetting for children and adolescents.

Youth who view media coverage may be afraid, worried, or anxious. They may not be able to sleep because of these reactions or may not be able to stop thinking about what they have seen or heard. Students may be distracted while in class because they are thinking about the event or they may not be able to pay attention to their class work because they are tired from not sleeping well.

Reactions such as fear and worry result from youth thinking that what they see on TV or the Internet could happen to them, their family, or their friends.

Disasters covered in the media do not have to occur close

by listening, explaining events, clarifying what happened, and providing assurances of safety and expressions of comfort.

HELPING STUDENTS DEAL WITH THEIR EMOTIONS

Students may feel confused and overwhelmed by their emotional reactions to disaster media coverage. They may need your help to sort through their feelings.

Helping a student deal with an emotional event includes:

- Being aware of your own emotions, and taking steps to cope with them in a healthy way that allows you to "be there" for students.
- Being available to discuss the event with students.
- Listening to what students say and validating their emotions.
- Providing honest responses to students, without overwhelming them with information.
- Encouraging students to talk about the event. If students are having difficulty talking about what is happening, use open-ended questions to start a conversation. (Examples of questions you might ask include: How do you feel about what happened? What do you think happened? Why do you think this happened?)
- Reassuring students that they are safe and that their family and the school staff will do everything they can to keep them safe.

Be aware of your own emotions. Being able to talk about the disaster will help students. To do so, you may need to take steps to control your own emotions so that you can listen to, talk with, and reassure students. It is natural to be upset and worried following a disaster, but sharing all of your own fears with students can overwhelm them. Teachers are models of emotional reactions and coping skills for their students. If students see you dealing in a healthy and honest way with your emotions and realize that it is possible to cope with even difficult or negative emotions and circumstances, they may feel reassured as a result and may learn good emotional reactions in the process.

Consider referring students who are very upset about a disaster to the school counselor or social worker. Following a traumatic event like a disaster—even one that happens far away from the school but is featured in the news—schools may want to establish plans that help teachers easily refer students who are particularly upset about the events to counselors or social workers who can



provide individual or group care for those students.

HELPING STUDENTS DEVELOP GOOD COPING SKILLS

Teachers can help students develop good coping skills. One way to cope following a disaster is to find a way to help those affected by the disaster. Teachers can help students identify ways to help such as making a donation of money or goods to a disaster relief agency. Donating time to a local community organization could have a positive impact on the community even if it is not directly related to a specific disaster. Classrooms and entire schools may decide that they want to participate in an activity together to help those affected by a disaster. A school food drive might allow an entire school to come together to cope with their feelings about a disaster and help those affected in the process.

Another way that teachers can help students cope with the fear and uncertainty caused by media coverage of a disaster is to promote family disaster planning. Encourage students to help their families create a disaster plan and compile a disaster kit. These activities advance preparedness and decrease anxiety while also giving families opportunities to share. Information on how to create a family preparedness plan is available in the "Additional Information" section at the end of this document. Teachers can, and should, also share details about the school and classroom disaster preparedness plans, which can further reassure students.

SCHOOL POLICY

Disasters and other traumatic events may occur during school hours. For example, the September 11th terrorist attacks occurred while many children were at school. Because classrooms often have televisions and Internet access, school administrators need to decide whether students will be allowed to watch traumatic events like a disaster or terrorist attack on school televisions or computers if an event occurs during school hours.

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Terrorism and Disaster Center (TDC) University of Missouri

Website: tdc.missouri.edu



National Child Traumatic Stress (NCTSN)

Website: www.nctsn.org



The screenshot shows the NCTSN website homepage. At the top, the NCTSN logo is displayed with the tagline "The National Child Traumatic Stress Network". To the right of the logo are social media links for Twitter and Facebook, with a "Like" button and a count of "4.6k". Below the logo is a navigation bar with links: Home, Trauma Types, Resources, About Us, Products, and Login / Register. A search bar is located on the right side of the navigation bar.

The main content area features a large banner on the left with a photo of three children and the text "Access the New Parent and Caregiver Pages". To the right of the banner are three boxes: "Terrorism & Disasters" (Readiness, Response, Recovery), "LEARNING CENTER" (FOR CHILD AND ADOLESCENT TRAUMA), and "Understanding Child Traumatic Stress". Below these boxes is a section titled "Information Resource Tools" with links to "Knowledge Bank", "Measures Review Database", and "Military Families Knowledge Bank".

On the right side of the main content area, there are three sections: "What's New?" (listing NCTSN IMPACT: Summer 2013 Newsletter, eBulletin September 2013, Flood Resources, and Resources for the DC Navy Yard Shooting), "Public Awareness" (listing September 11 Anniversary and National Preparedness Month (September 2013)), and "Upcoming Events" (listing Polyvictimization and Sexual Exploitation of Young Boys and Men (September 26, 2013)).

At the bottom of the page, there is a row of six icons representing different user groups: "For Parents & Caregivers", "For Professionals", "Military Children & Families", "For Educators", "For the Media", and "Información en Español".

Questions?

References

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