



After the earthquake: Tips for teachers – supporting children with ASD

When a large earthquake happens, everyone's sense of safety is threatened. The first concern is assuring them that they're safe and that you will help keep them safe until their parents or other family members come to get them at the end of the day. You can help by re-establishing daily routines as soon as possible.

Children might become confused and fearful as they might not have the ability to understand or process their feelings. Helping children feel safe takes time, patience, and it takes the ability of the adults in their lives to be reassuring again and again.

All children are different and might not show stress in the same way, but it is common for children to revert to behaviours they have previously grown out of eg, sucking their thumb, wetting themselves. It is important to know the individual child and take note of any changes in their behaviour.

Things to keep in mind when helping young children under stress

- Assure children that you have a plan in place should anything happen again.
- Speak calmly and reassuringly – because they're coming to you from a stressful situation, they might need extra attention and reassurance.
- Spend time with the children, especially when they arrive.
- Address them by their names often to let them know you know who they are and that you are there for them.
- Learn what makes each child comfortable – get as much information from their parents as possible.
- Don't force any participation if they are hesitant or obviously feeling anxious or sad.
- Allow them to bring or hold onto any objects they find familiar or comforting.
- Provide a variety of calm, soothing activities – music, reading, art, blowing bubbles.
- Have plenty of paper and crayons for children to draw their thoughts and feelings – record these in portfolios.

Autism and coping with traumatic events such as earthquakes

Children with ASD are very dependant on regularity, predictability and routine to manage their behaviour and emotions. Natural disasters can displace these children along with their families, creating anxiety and stress which will be heightened by their autism.

People on the autism spectrum might:

- not understand what you say
- appear deaf
- be unable to speak or speak with difficulty
- engage in repetitive behaviours
- act upset for no apparent reason
- appear insensitive to pain
- appear anxious or nervous
- dart away from you unexpectedly
- engage in self-stimulating behaviours (eg, hand flapping or rocking).

Observe and listen

- Do not attempt to physically block self-stimulating behaviour as this is calming to a child with autism.
- Remember that each child is unique and might act differently than others.
- Children with autism might resort to asking the same question over and over again as they try to process what has happened. Patiently answer those questions.
- Children who are non-verbal might resort to more self-stimulatory behaviours and/or become very withdrawn.
- Acknowledge that they don't like change and that many changes will come up during a disaster. Try to give advance warning of changes – we won't sleep here tonight; the road is broken, we might have to take a different route.
- Allow them to have favourite objects with them.

Connect and communicate

- Have their preferred method of communication handy.
- Remember that each child with autism is unique and might act differently than others.
- Speak slowly and use simple language. Use language the child understands. Speak at the child's language level, giving short explanations.
- Check the child's understanding.
- Be aware of the child's tendency to take things literally
- Repeat simple questions.
- Allow time for responses.
- Give lots of praise.

Use pictures and talk together

Each discussion offers an opportunity to help children understand and cope. Provide information to more than one sense at a time, allowing children to see, hear, touch, talk, and do. Show photos of the recovery operation eg, tell them how the fire-fighter or police officer pictured is helping. This can be done many times over the coming days.

Use Social Stories

Social Stories are a way to teach social knowledge and skills to children with autism spectrum disorders. A story is written and illustrated with pictures or photographs from a child's perspective. Write a story about what is happening to the child and their family and how you are planning to manage the after shocks.

Try to establish a schedule

Try to establish a regular schedule as soon as possible eg, set regular times for meals or particular activities. A natural disaster can greatly disrupt regular schedules, increasing the extent to which your life feels chaotic and out of control. Coming up with a daily, structured schedule can help children with autism establish a sense of predictability and control and control fears and anxiety.

Dealing with the lack of awareness of danger

A child with autism might not be aware of danger in the same way other children are. Gently persuade the child to move away from danger or remove them if they might be harmed.

Stress might cause some children to hurt themselves

Under stress some children might hurt themselves. Use the least invasive technique possible to ensure they're kept safe.

Be calm

Parents, educators and caregivers need to appear calm during a disaster or emergency, even if they are not. Children with autism spectrum disorder might sense your emotional state – and mimic it. Practise being calm eg, lower your voice, talk at your normal rate and slow your actions and gestures.

Use visual signs

For some children with ASD, the use of boundaries and signs might help them to understand the limits and the expectations. Use dividers, tape boundaries, and signs as needed for setting expectations and limits eg, for children who climb on high surfaces or enter areas that they should not, STOP signs will let them know that what they are doing is dangerous. Using colour tape to designate boundaries on carpets, floors, or walls in an earthquake drill could help to visually remind the child where they need to be.