



Coping with Disaster: Children with Autism and their Families

As the nation attempts to recuperate after the recent disasters in the Gulf Coast, many families are struggling to regain control of their homes and former lives. Such turmoil strains all those involved and in a family unit where there is a child with autism such instability can be all the more devastating. However, there are some steps that these families can take to help them cope in the face of disaster:

Learn to recognize cues and triggers- Generally there are “trigger” words and/or sounds that solicit reactionary responses from children with autism. Parents should be particularly sensitive to their child’s behavior during these trying times. They will often display certain “cues” to convey their feeling in crisis situations. The “cues” could consist of anything from getting overly irritable, nervous tics, changes in patterns of speech, feeling of being ill, or becoming withdrawn or quiet. Adults can then have advance warnings of future problems and may be able to deter further stress before the situation becomes uncontrollable.

Provide for specific trainings and intervention techniques- Children greatly benefit from concrete information presented at the proper level of understanding and maturity. Furthermore, these specified teachings will help the child develop self-control and self-management skills as well as strategies to use when disaster strikes. These training should be practiced with regards to circumstances such as a school crisis, terrorism, or hurricane threat.

Maintain as much of the routine as possible- Children with autism rely heavily on routines and upsets in this routine causes great anxiety. Although many changes in emergency situations are beyond control, the parent should try to adhere to as much of the routine as feasible. They should make an effort to have the same meal, play, and bedtimes even when in new surroundings. Parents should also try to provide for some concrete items that represent the more routine environment (e.g., certain toys, blankets, or eating utensils).

Make use of social stories- It is difficult to understand what and how information seen in the media is being processed by children with autism. With the use of social stories, parents can better explain poorly understood behavior and/or images seen on T.V or in newspapers. These storybooks provide basic concrete information and can be kept by the child as a permanent reinforcement tool. Social stories should explain appropriate ways to react and respond to urgent situations in a manner that is within the child’s comprehension level.

All of these strategies can be used to guide parents of children with autism that find themselves in the state of emergency but it is important to understand that children could and will exhibit less self-control when confronted by highly unusual situations. Instances where the child losses control are likely to occur and adults must have a plan of action prepared; to best do so, parents should consult with a professional and organize a plan that is best suited for their individual child.

For more information or to schedule an appointment, please call 337-436-9533 or 1-888-414-FYCA.

220 Louie Street Lake Charles, LA 70601 Phone 337/436-9533 Fax: 337/439-9941 www.fyca.org

Member of Louisiana Association of Nonprofit Organizations; Member of National Network for Youth; Member of the Alliance for Children and Families; Member of the State and National CASA Associations; Full Member of the National Children’s Alliance; Member of CACs of Louisiana; Licensed by the State of Louisiana

