

## Read for Resilience Program Helps Young Children Cope After a Disaster

**Jaci Foged**  
Extension Educator,  
Lancaster County

March 13, 2019 will be a day many Nebraskans will not soon forget. It was furiously raining in eastern Nebraska and there was a winter storm with high winds and blizzard conditions in western Nebraska. Nebraska had damage not only from high water levels, but in many areas there was damage due to the break-up of river ice. Many animals were stranded at their homes while families fled for higher ground. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is predicting it will be over nine years before Nebraskans recover from these disasters.

Since March 13, several communities in Nebraska have received historic rainfall along with damaging winds. Residents continue to work together as they recover from severe weather events.

### Helping Children Cope With Disaster

If you or someone you know was directly involved in this disaster, you probably have experienced a wide range of emotions. Like adults, young children may have difficulty expressing their feelings, which may lead to difficulties with coping and understanding their feelings. Young children may exhibit intense emotions and engage in challenging behaviors while others may have separation anxiety, bed-wetting or be very quiet.

In supporting young children with these different reactions and feelings, it is important for adults to remain calm and approach behaviors in a thoughtful way. Parents and childcare providers are in the best position to help young children cope. It is in our calm that children learn how to respond during difficult situations.

A particularly engaging way to help young children understand their feelings and reactions is with storybook reading. Using children's litera-



Amy Napoli, UNL Child, Youth & Family Studies

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ture in an interactive way can help children heal by better understanding their experiences (Betzalel and Shechtman, 2010) and can improve their coping skills (Burns-Nader & Hernandez-Reif, 2016; Nicholson & Pearson, 2003; Pola & Nelson, 2014). Additionally, it provides the parent or caregiver with tools to increase their own understanding of how young children may experience traumatic events such as natural disasters.

### Extension Creates Read for Resilience Program

In response to the March 13 disasters, Nebraska Extension's The Learning Child team created the Read for Resilience program. The team identified nine children's books to support their coping and understanding feelings after experiencing a disaster, loss and/or grief. Then team members developed reading guides to accompany the books to provide parents and caregivers with age-appropriate probing questions to explore children's thoughts and feelings. The guides also include suggested activities to further extend children's ability to process their feelings and experiences. Parents and caregivers of youth can receive



#### Recommended Questions

- **SILLY** – What activities make you feel silly?
- **SCARED** – The child is scared because of the lightning and thunder. Can you tell me about a time you were scared?
- **DISAPPOINTED** – Can you think of a time you did not get what you wanted?
- **HAPPY** – What makes you smile?
- **SAD** – The boy in the book has a tear on his face. Why do you think he is sad?
- **ANGRY** – How does your body feel when you are angry?
- **THANKFUL** – Name 3 things you are thankful for.
- **FRUSTRATED** – What is something that is hard for you to do? (After children respond, add the word "yet" to their frustration. For example, "You cannot tie your shoes yet.")

#### Suggested Activity

Create a bucket list to beat boredom!

- Supplies: 10 or more clothespins, 1 mini bucket and fine-point sharpie markers.
- Decide what you are creating this bucket list for (i.e. summer activities, rainy day blues, car containment, etc.).
- Come up with a variety of activities you can do together to beat boredom. Write out each activity on a separate clothespin.
- Display the clothespins around the rim of the mini bucket and as you complete an activity, put the clothespin in the bucket.
- Talk to children about how doing things together makes them feel. Refer back to some of the different feelings in the book.

#### Ways to Support Children

The last page of the book includes a note to parents which provides parents with additional activities to do with their children as they read the story.

Strong, secure relationships with a parent, childcare provider or other caring adult are essential for children as they work to understand their feelings after experiencing a disaster, loss and/or grief. As children begin learning about their emotions (what they look like and feel like), they will begin to understand how they can manage those emotions. They will also begin to identify when their parents or friends might be feeling a particular emotion and learn how best to respond.

#### Common Reactions

Most children involved in a traumatic event experience an emotional reaction. While each child's experience is different, there are some common and typical ways they respond. These include:

- Sleep issues, nightmares, not wanting to go to bed or get up.
- Difficulty with transitions, such as going to preschool or leaving.
- Exaggerated reactions to small crisis.
- Increased difficulties with peers or siblings such as conflict, aggression or withdrawal.
- Unable to cope with change.
- Clinging to familiar things or family.
- Changes in eating, dressing or toilet habits.
- Overactive behavior.
- Irritability, uncooperative, bored.
- Preoccupation with the trauma.

#### Contact Us

Visit <https://epd.unl.edu/> to find an Extension Educator in your area.

Visit us on the Web:  
<https://flood.unl.edu/>  
<https://child.unl.edu/>

One of nine reading guides developed by Nebraska Extension with recommended questions, suggested activities and more.

up to five free books through this program (approximately a \$100 value).

To request

a free book or to download a storybook guide, please visit <http://child.unl.edu/read4resilience>, complete a short survey and select the book(s) which meets your child's need.

Holly Hatton-Bowers and Amy Napoli, assistant professors of child, youth and family studies and early childhood Extension specialists, are the lead organizers of this program. Team members include Lynn DeVries, Jaci Foged, Carrie Gottschalk, Lisa Poppe, Lee Sherry, Jackie Steffen, LaDonna Werth, Tasha Wulf, Karen Wedding and Kathleen Lodl.

One person who requested books wrote, "Thank you, thank you for your support for our children! We have a 6-year-old daughter and a 2-year-old daughter. We have noticed through conversation and drawing with our 6-year-old that she has been affected by the flooding. The books will assist us greatly in helping our daughters

understand the impact the flood has had on our family and reassurance that they are safe. I still have a picture that our 6-year-old drew of a child surrounded by water and she told me that she prayed for 'all the flooding' in school that day."

To ensure that this program continues, The Learning Child team is accepting monetary donations which can be given through the 4-H Foundation at <http://go.unl.edu/r4rdonate>. These donations will be used to purchase books so parents and

caregivers receive them at no charge.

One donor wrote, "It is such a great project and great work you all are doing."

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Nebraska Extension has compiled several disaster response resources for parents and caregivers of youth at <https://child.unl.edu/disaster>.
- See page 4 of this NEBLINE for suggestions how to prepare for disasters.

## EXTENSION RESOURCES

**flood.unl.edu**  
email [floodresponse@unl.edu](mailto:floodresponse@unl.edu)



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## CONNECT WITH US

Nebraska Extension in Lancaster County  
 444 Cherrycreek Road, Suite A  
 Lincoln, NE 68528  
 402-441-7180  
<http://lancaster.unl.edu>



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