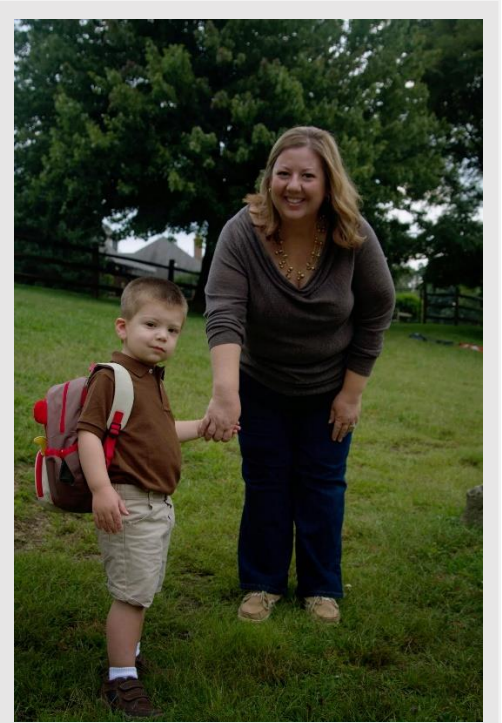


Talking to Children about Hurricane Harvey: Perspective of a Parent & Education Professional

The news of recent hurricanes and flooding, wildfires and other disasters has left many adults wondering how to support the children in their lives in understanding and managing the emotions around what they've seen.

When natural disasters or public emergencies occur, educators and parents are always faced with difficult decisions about how to handle conversations and communications with the children who trust them for guidance and safety. Addressing these events in a responsible and thoughtful manner is always better than pretending the issue or event is not there. It's incredible how impactful the anxiety of these experiences can be for children. We have a responsibility to provide assistance in managing awareness and understanding, with age appropriate supports and active listening.



Marleah Herman-Umpleby, MS CCC-SLP
Oliver Umpleby

As the mother of a sensitive boy with unique learning needs and as a speech language pathologist, I've been faced with the challenge of discussing this and other scary or difficult to understand events. I find that whether I'm helping my son process and discuss these issues or supporting students in the educational setting, many of the same tenets seem to apply.

As a Parent

It sometimes feels easier to hide our children from the scary things in the world, and protect them in a bubble of childhood innocence. As much as we'd like to do that, it's just not possible. An overheard conversation, a newspaper story, and images in the media deliver stories with an intensity that can't be ignored. Children are more likely to feel safe and trust adults when a

responsible amount of information is shared with them rather than avoided and leaving them vulnerable to having to manage scary information without guidance.

As an Educator

Our learners count on us for so much, and guidance and support during difficult situations is high on the list. This support needs to be provided with a family's intentions and values in mind and through the context of shared experiences in the classroom. Communication with parents and families is critical to ensure consistency in messaging and a team approach.

As you think about managing these conversations with your children and/or students, consider the following suggestions:

- Follow your instincts. As a parent, you know your child better than anyone. Be mindful of what you think they can process.
- Manage your own emotional reaction to the situation before you talk with children. It will be of comfort for them to see that you are calm.
- Listen more than you talk. It can be easy to end up saying more than necessary or complicating a conversation unnecessarily when we stumble through a difficult topic. Listen to what your children are saying and provide specific and focused responses based on their thoughts.
- Acknowledge the emotional reaction your child is having to the situation, and let them know what they are feeling is normal and to be expected.
- Share carefully screened images. Children often ask to see video or photos to help understand challenging situations.
- Validate the idea of looking for helpers (credited to Mr. Rogers) with specifics and strategies. For example, you can tell children to look for people helping and working together. Ask them to think of ways that they can be helpers in this situation too.
- Be honest. We don't want to provide information at a depth that will leave children worried for their immediate or future safety. However, they are trusting you for accurate and honest information. Find that balance so you can answer what you know honestly and make a plan for finding out more when it is needed.

- Create a plan for sustained conversation. Many children need to process these events slowly, so having materials available such as a shared book, social story or other supports can allow for consistency and a reduction in stress and anxiety.
- Develop an action plan. Whether it is a plan to donate supplies, collect toys for other children, or raise awareness in your community, it helps children deal with the sense of helplessness when they have responsibility for making a difference.

As always, we need to consider the specific needs of individuals with complex communication needs when addressing these topics. The AAC-RERC has compiled information on supporting this population and you can find more about that here: <http://aac-lerc.psu.edu/index.php/pages/show/id/4> . We have also provided a [set of communication supports](#) that might be helpful as-is, or as a guide to help you create something customized for the individuals you serve.

This week I've had several discussions with my son and other children about the events that have unfolded in our country. I found that my son in particular was initially most concerned about his safety and wanted to explore the map to better understand where this is happening. As soon as he understood the location, his concern went to the friends we have living in the impacted area. Together we made contact with our friends and created a plan to support them specifically. This conversation has been ongoing, and largely directed by his questions and comments. I've seen a significant reduction in his stress about the topic and know that we all feel empowered by the opportunity to be helpers to the people directly impacted. Many thanks to the parents, educators and friends who provided many useful suggestions for our family and others!