

Preparing for Impending Storms

Children have greater resilience when facing impending storms if we take time to engage and listen to them openly without immediately reacting with our own solutions for quelling their anxieties. Often loving adults rush to quell their fears because it's hard to see them struggle. Since we can't control storms, some may feel inadequate at helping children with coping skills. Because children and youth are so able to read our body language and unspoken concerns, they may shy away from bringing their fears up to us, resulting in self-isolation and trying to manage their fears on their own. From there, anxieties only build. **Here are some suggestions:**

1. Remind yourself that true resilience comes from internalizing a belief or skill, not from being taught and not from hearing out suggestions. Children have to struggle to gain resilience.
2. Remember that resilience isn't never having stress or anxiety, resilience is experiencing it and managing its effect on us. This is also true for children.
3. Know that times like these aren't about adults having all the answers. Instead, it's a blend of the youth naming and framing their fears, adults helping them devise coping or action that might help, and then for us to ask questions that help them improve their ideas. Finally, offer your honest reassurance of measures that are in place that really will help provide a safeguard.
4. Never promise something can't control. Instead, if a child brings up that which is beyond our control, acknowledge that, and then add the mitigating factors, supports in place and people who have been trained to assist in our survival.
5. Remember, TV coverage always shows the worst of the storms, and most who will be affected will not be in the worst of it. Don't watch coverage, or at least don't have kids watch it.
6. Keep in mind that naming something is the beginning of mastery! Help kids name their fears.

A conversation with youth might include:

- *A statement of the obvious:* We are all hearing that there is a big storm headed our way. Both adults and children often have fears or anxieties with the anticipation. We're going to take a few minutes to talk through what concerns us, and then we're also going to look at the kinds of measures that are in place to help us get through this is the best possible way.
- *Help students label their fears and anxieties by giving some examples or stating some of your own that would be appropriate for the age group:* One thing I've worried about is that we had a creek behind our house flood, so I know that my neighbors are worried about how soon we'll be able to drive out of the neighborhood after the storm passes. What kinds of worries do you think [students] [your friends/peers] might be having? (*Notice, it isn't necessary for students to "own" the fear as their own at this point, it is often easier to frame it as one that someone else might have. Most often, students are still naming their own fear. Allow students to name their fears. Keep your expression one of concern, but not anxiety. As children voice their fears, you don't have to make a statement of whether their fears are valid at this point unless they're way off base in regard to reality. So if a young student/ child says they fear they'll be burned with lava, you can take a moment to kindly clarify that that is happening in Hawaii where there is a volcano and a hurricane, but that isn't part of the hurricane. Responses at this point might be, "I can understand that there might be children who worry about that," and "If I were young, I might have that fear also," or simply, "OK, next?" or "Um-hmmm"*)

- *After fears have been voiced, instead of immediately offering our own adult reassurance, it will help them build resilience to come up with ideas on their own. For now, we're still focused on what individuals and **families** might do:*
 - *For Olders:* When we have had storms or bitter cold or floods or [what natural disasters have they known about that were in your region?], what kinds of planning did families do that made a difference? *Elicit all the answers they can think of, and then you might add additional helpful steps, framing it from many sources:* Before the last storm, I saw on the news that lots of people were stocking up on candles and canned goods, and my neighbors bought extra fuel for their generator to help everyone on our street.
 - *For Youngers:* Some of you have never lived through a storm because we haven't had one like this in a while, but maybe you've seen things on television, or you have some of your own ideas: What do you think families can do... what can your parents do to help your family be ready for the storm? *As above, elicit their ideas and then add more.*
- **Now** help them focus on regional efforts and add your own knowledge of all that is being put in place to keep the **community** as safe as possible. *Examples they or you might note:*
 - There are shelters opening up, so people who are in the direct path of the storm will have a safer place to be. (If your schools will be one, let them know that!)
 - Lots of extra police and fire fighters will be on staff and many National Guard soldiers will be coming to provide help.
 - Power companies will send lots of extra workers and trucks and those workers will work very long hours, as soon as they safely can, to get the electricity turned on again.
 - Road crews will be pulling downed trees off the roads and opening up the culverts under the roads so places with flooding can recede more quickly.
- **Next talk about resiliency:** Although we might feel anxiety or fear, we also realize that the way we learn to cope and manage our feelings is not by hiding from them, but by experiencing them and learning ways to manage them so they don't manage us! Let's hear some examples of things you were afraid of when you were younger, but when you look back at them now, you realize that you learned some great skills in the process of surviving or mastering the situation?
- What do you think you might learn from this one?
- *It might be helpful to explore the value of anxiety – it gets our attention when we need to be paying attention! After that, the better we manage it by taking action, the better off we are.*
- **Finally, wrap it up** with some conversation about coming back together after the storm has passed. *The conversation will vary depending on whether you know your schools will be closing, etc.* Once the storm has passed, when we start school again, we'll take some time to talk about how we got through the storm, what surprised us and what we learned.
- **For teachers leading this conversation:** When you get home to your parents tonight, tell them about our conversation and about how we learn about managing our feelings at times like this. You might ask your parents to have some of the same kind of conversation we've had today.
- **If you're a parent leading this conversation:** When you are at school, tell your teacher about our conversation and especially let him/her know if you have concerns about being at school because of the storm. I don't want you to be worried about things here at home without letting me know. I also want to be sure you know to let your teacher know if you have concerns.

In general, keep your tone hopeful, but never dismissive of their fears. Voice your own confidence in the elements of safety you can name: that county, state and national organizations will be mobilizing for the areas that will need them most, that your home is prepared, that you have neighbors who will help one another, and most of all, that all through history, people have coped with difficult challenges.