

# Helping Children Cope with Holidays After a Disaster

Holidays and special occasions may be especially hard for children who lost a family member or close friend, or were displaced from their home and belongings due to a natural disaster. The special occasion may give rise to feelings of sadness, fear or anger. Significant events, including holidays and special occasions highlight that a loved one or something that they care about is missed. Special days in children's lives may feel different for them after the loss of a close family member or friend and children may experience new emotions like anger and sadness.

Below are suggestions for parents to cope with holidays and special occasions:

**Do the best you can.** Getting through the first special event, such as a birthday or Thanksgiving, is a big step. There is no "correct" or "incorrect" way to handle a special occasion. You can only do what you feel is best.

**Do not feel pressured.** Celebrating a holiday or special occasion after the loss of a loved one is very hard for family members. Do not let anticipation of the special day cause more stress than needed and do not feel pressured to celebrate the special day in a way you do not prefer.

**Plan ahead.** Planning ahead for the special occasion will help address some of the stress, anxiety and anticipation related to the holiday or special occasion for you and your children.

- Speak to your children prior to the special occasion or holiday. Listen to their suggestions for plans for the special event. Try to incorporate everyone's ideas and consider all family members' feelings regarding plans for the occasion.
- Find out ahead of time about the details of the special events you are attending. Consider if any particular aspects of the event will make you or your children feel uncomfortable.



**Be flexible.** Do not feel that you have to stick to a certain way of doing things; you can change your mind.

**Respect others.** Everyone deals with things differently. Respect those who approach the special occasion differently from you.

**Establish new traditions.** Be open to the idea of establishing new traditions and ways of doing things. At the same time, you may incorporate the new traditions with old ones.

**Anticipate children's reactions.** Think ahead so you can deal with moments that may be awkward or upsetting for children. Consider and anticipate your children's reactions to planned events. Talk to your children about their feelings and concerns prior to the event and problem solve ways in which you can help them better cope.

**Help children with their feelings.** Provide an environment that will allow children to freely express their feelings and thoughts.

**Initiate discussions.** Talk openly with your children about the upcoming special event or holiday. Listen to their input about suggestions for the occasion and their feelings and thoughts related to the suggested plans.

**Anticipate questions.** Discuss questions and comments children may receive from others. This will prepare them for what they may experience when they get together with others for the special occasion.

**Encourage children to engage in activities.** Activities that help your children to remember and feel connected to their loved one can be helpful. Suggested activities include: writing an essay about the person, creating a family tree, making a scrap book and volunteering or donating in the person's honor.

*Adapted from NYU Child Study Center at [www.AboutOurKids.org](http://www.AboutOurKids.org).*

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