

# Tips for Talking to Children & Youth About the Oil Spill Disaster

## A Guide for Parents and Educators



The grief, loss, and change from the oil spill disaster can leave children feeling frightened, confused, and insecure. Whether children have experienced personal consequences of the oil spill through their family or community, watched it on television, or overheard it being discussed by adults, parents and educators must be informed and ready to help when emotional and physical reactions begin to occur.

Children and youth may react to the oil spill disaster in many different ways. Some may have reactions very soon; others may do fine for weeks or months and then begin to show troubling behavior. Knowing the signs that are common at different ages can help parents, caregivers, and teachers recognize problems and respond appropriately.

### Preschool Age

Children ages 1–5 find it particularly hard to adjust to change and loss. These youngsters have not yet developed their own coping skills, so they depend on parents, family members, and teachers to help them through difficult times.

Very young children may return to an earlier behavioral stage to cope with the stress and loss associated with the oil spill disaster. Preschoolers may resume thumb-sucking or bedwetting, or they may suddenly become afraid of strangers, animals, darkness, or “monsters.” They may cling to a parent or teacher, or become very attached to a place where they feel safe.

Changes in eating and sleeping habits are also common, as are unexplainable aches and pains.

Other symptoms to watch for are disobedience, hyperactivity, speech difficulties, and aggressive or withdrawn behavior.

### Early Childhood

Children ages 5–11 may have some of the same reactions that younger children have. They also may withdraw from playgroups and friends, compete more for the attention of parents, fear going to school, allow school performance to drop, become aggressive, or find it hard to concentrate. These children may return to more childish behaviors, such as asking to be fed or dressed.

### Adolescence

Children and youth ages 12–18 are likely to have vague physical complaints when under stress, and they may abandon chores, school work, or other responsibilities that they previously handled. Although some may compete vigorously for attention from parents and teachers, they also may withdraw, resist authority, become disruptive or aggressive at home or in the classroom, or begin to experiment with high-risk behaviors, such as alcohol or drug use.





These young people are at a developmental stage in which the opinions of others are very important. They need to be thought of as “normal” by their friends and are less concerned about relating well with adults or participating in family activities they once enjoyed.

In later adolescence, teens may experience feelings of helplessness and guilt because they are unable to assume full adult responsibilities as their family and community responds to the oil spill disaster. Older teens may minimize their emotions.

### **How to Help**

Reassurance is the key to helping children and youth through this difficult time. Very young children need a lot of cuddling, as well as verbal support. Answer questions about the event honestly, but do not dwell on the details or allow the oil spill to dominate family or classroom time indefinitely. Encourage children of all ages to express emotions through conversation, writing, or artwork and to find a way to help others who were affected.

Try to maintain a normal household or classroom routine and encourage children to participate in recreational activities. Temporarily reduce your expectations about performance in school or at home, perhaps by substituting less demanding responsibilities for normal assignments or chores.

Acknowledge that you, too, may have reactions associated with the oil spill disaster and take steps to promote your own physical and emotional healing. Model healthy stress-relieving behaviors, minimize alcohol intake, and be proactive about managing your family’s or classroom’s stress.

### **Tips for Talking to Children and Youth About the Oil Spill**

- Provide children and youth with opportunities to talk about what they are seeing on television and to ask questions
- Do not be afraid to admit that you cannot answer all of their questions
- Answer questions at a level they can understand
- Provide ongoing opportunities for them to talk
- Discuss what they can realistically do to help; almost everyone finds comfort in being part of the solution to a shared problem
- Encourage discussion of other fears and concerns about unrelated issues. This is a good opportunity to explore these issues too.
- Monitor television watching. Some parents or caregivers may wish to limit exposure to ongoing media coverage of the impact of the oil spill. To the extent possible, adults should be present when their child is watching news coverage of the event. It is at these times that questions might arise.
- Help children understand that there are no bad emotions and that a wide range of reactions is normal. Encourage children to express their feelings to adults (including teachers and parents) who can help them understand their feelings and emotions.



## Hotline

*National Suicide Prevention Lifeline*

Toll-Free: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (4889)

Web Site: <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

## Treatment Locator

*SAMHSA Treatment Referral Helpline*

Toll-Free: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

TTY: 1-800-487-4TTY (4889)

Web Site: <http://www.samhsa.gov/treatment/>

## Information Clearinghouse

*SAMHSA Health Information Network*

Toll-Free: 1-877-726-4727

TTY: 1-800-487-4TTY (4889)

Web Site: <http://www.samhsa.gov/shin>

## Helpful Resources

*SAMHSA Disaster Technical Assistance Center (DTAC)*

Toll-Free: 1-800-308-3515

E-Mail: [DTAC@samhsa.hhs.gov](mailto:DTAC@samhsa.hhs.gov)

Web Site: <http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/dtac>

*For specific State referral information, please contact SAMHSA DTAC.*

*The National Child Traumatic Stress Network*

Web Site: <http://www.nctsnet.org>

*Workplace Helpline*

Toll-Free: 1-800-967-5752

Web Site: <http://www.workplace.samhsa.gov/>

*Note: Inclusion of a resource in this fact sheet does not imply endorsement by the Center for Mental Health Services, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.*

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- Help children identify positive things that have emerged from the tragedy, such as heroic actions, families who united and shared support, and the assistance offered by people throughout the community

## When Talking Isn't Enough

For some children, more active interventions may be required, particularly if they were more directly affected by the consequences of the oil spill disaster.

- The family, as a unit, might consider counseling if the emotional or physical problems persist
- Families may choose to permit “temporary” behavior, such as clinging. Several arrangements may help children separate gradually after the agreed-upon time limit: spending extra time with parents immediately before bedtime, leaving the child’s bedroom door slightly ajar, and using a nightlight.
- Many parents have their own fears related to the oil spill disaster or other fears they may be unable to acknowledge. Parents often are more able to seek help on their children’s behalf and may, in fact, use their children’s problems as a way of asking for help for themselves and other family members.
- Teachers also can help children with art and play activities, as well as by encouraging group discussions in the classroom and informational presentations about the oil spill

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