

*Here We Go Again—Kids' Reactions to Continued Hurricane Threats*  
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**Question:** We live on the west coast of Florida and although last hurricane season was frightening, so far we've been able to escape one this year. However, my nine-year-old son is glued to the television when not in school, and he seems obsessed whenever news begins about a new hurricane forming. Just this week he said that he was too frightened to go to school, leaving his rabbit home alone, even though the weather is beautiful. He's in a special program for children with learning disabilities and cannot afford to miss classes. I've tried talking with him about hurricane preparedness, discussing our evacuation plans (including taking the rabbit) as well as the fact that the current hurricane has already moved out into the Gulf and away from our city. He actually seems to be developing a phobia to storms, as even a thunder shower sends him into a panic. What can I do to help him to relax?

**Answer:** A phobia is defined as an irrational fear, and to your nine-year-old the possibility of a storm hitting his area is apparently not only possible, but probable. Phobias are based upon one's *perception* of reality, so even though the current storm has moved on, he most likely believes that it, or the next one, will bring him harm. And, it sounds as if he experienced some frightening moments during last hurricane season that continue to color his perception of how safe his world is, especially during this time of year.

According to the *NYU Child Study Center*, children who tend to worry excessively are those who "live in areas that have previously experienced or may experience a natural disaster...experienced a personal stressful or traumatic event such as a parental divorce or death in the family...or have a learning or emotional problem." The *Monitor on Psychology* noted that 12 percent of children even ten months after a severe hurricane can still exhibit "severe or very severe levels of post-traumatic stress disorder...the event is just the beginning of a sometimes cascading set of stressors children and their families have to cope with...the hurricane may be over, but for many people, the aftermath and coping are just beginning."

Taking these findings into account, it's not unusual for your son to be so concerned about the weather. As an adult it's probably easier for you to put things into proper perspective—to learn from the storms of last year and to better prepare for what lies ahead in this hurricane season. Part of that ability to function is based in your years of experience dealing with problems, sorting out what you can do and what is beyond your control, and actually having the power to make decisions about evacuation, planning for the kids and pets and understanding what is really being reported on the news.

You'll best understand your child's fears by trying to put yourself in his shoes. He may feel that he has no say-so in this matter—he'd probably leave the state if he could but his family lives in a hurricane-prone area. Lots of kids are talking about the destruction from Katrina, it's difficult to turn on the television without seeing something about a storm and

devastation and if he's prone to worry it's only natural that he's becoming obsessed with the possibility that last year's experiences will reoccur. So, what can you do?

Try to strike a fine balance between focusing on his fears (too much of which may add fuel to the fire) and avoidance of the issue (which does not allow him to emote and ask appropriate questions). Be patient—you may have to explain the same fact several times (the current storm has left the area, you have an evacuation plan, your town is not at the same risk as was New Orleans). Listen to his concerns and do not be dismissive. Focus on his emotion—not only his distortion of reality. Let him know that you hear his fear and anxiety and that you know that it's frightening when the wind howls and the trees bend under the pelting rain. Let him know that you become concerned when you watch the news—not only for your area but for folks who live in other affected states.

Try to discern what possible “magical thinking” your child may possess. Many, many kids who are fearful, obsessive or phobic believe that if they think a certain thought (“I wish something bad would happen to the bully down the block” or “wouldn't it be great if something happened to our school building so that I wouldn't have to go to class”) or engage in a certain action (take two steps forward, then three steps backward) that their thoughts or acts alone can cause meteorological, illness or other events to take place. I know this may sound silly, but where do you think the warning “don't step on a crack or you'll break your mother's back” came from? Yep, magical thinking! When people, children in particular, feel frightened or not in control of a situation, many resort to seemingly nonsensical thinking to give them some semblance of control. And, because most mothers' backs didn't break, tendencies to avoid crack-stepping have been rewarded over time. Check it out with your son to ascertain whether he's harboring some thoughts of having “caused” the storms in your area last year, and again, listen, reassure and be comforting with him.

Limit his television watching to appropriate videos, sporting events or TV shows that are upbeat and avoid the news. This may mean that you'll have to limit your TV watching, especially before his bedtime. An anxious child does not need to hear adult conversation (at the dinner table, on the telephone) about the storm season, so be careful what you say within his earshot. If a thunder storm approaches, try to distract him from the storm noises, possibly by playing video games or board games as bedtime approaches, and make sure that there's comforting noise (parents talking, soothing music) as ambience when he goes to bed. And, keep up his structure. On school days he is to attend class no matter how whiney he gets, is expected to complete his homework and show up for Scout meetings and team practices. Encourage outside play—that's one of the best stress busters for all youngsters—it's tough to be worried when you're shooting hoops with the guys.

The bottom line is that it's not unusual for children's fears to become irrational, but you can minimize the anxiety if you stick with the daily structure, listen to their concerns, reinforce the positive (safety, precautions taken, that you're informed and in charge), but that you are there to provide comfort and reassurance.