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Adaptive Parenting in the Disaster Context: Parental Concerns and Protective Practices



What this research is about

Environmental disasters like floods, wildfires, and hurricanes are becoming more frequent due to climate change. Many studies have focused on the effects that disasters can have on children, but not so much on parent–child dynamics. As a whole, families are impacted by disasters, and parents have to adapt their parenting strategies in the face of these challenges. This study examines the impact that the 2013 flood in High River, Alberta, had on parenting styles and parent–child relationships.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited 105 parents with at least one child aged 17 years or younger, whose families were living in High River during the 2013 flood. The participants were recruited via posters placed in community centres, libraries, and other public locations. Most participants identified as women (83%), in a relationship (77%), and with three or fewer children (83%). The majority identified as white (84%). The duration of displacement from their homes after the flood ranged from less than a month to over a year. One parent per family participated in the study.

Qualitative, open-ended interviews were conducted to compare pre-flood family functioning with its development during the disaster and its aftermath. The interviews took place one year after the flood in 2014. This study focused on parenting styles and parent–child relationships. The data was analyzed by drawing on research by Baumrind (1966) and Maccoby and Martin (1983), which classifies parenting styles into four categories: authoritarian, permissive, authoritative, and neglectful. Authoritative parenting, which balances demandingness and responsiveness, is considered to produce the most positive outcomes in children. Demandingness is related to the degree of control that parents exercise in the lives of their children, while responsiveness relates to the level of warmth and care parents provide their children.

What you need to know

Disasters can have a significant impact on how families function as they are forced to adapt to a "new normal." While previous studies have mostly looked at the impact on children, how parents adapt their parenting styles post-disaster is an understudied area. Different parenting styles have been tied to different social, emotional, and psychological outcomes for children. This study looks at how parenting styles and parent–child relationships might have changed after the 2013 flood in High River, Alberta. The majority of parents increased their demandingness (control) and responsiveness (warmth) post-disaster, aligning with the authoritative parenting style. This resulted in more positive parent–child relationships.

What the researchers found

The flood negatively impacted all the families in various areas like housing, employment, recreation, and education. However, most parents (86%) stated that they grew closer to their children post-disaster. Most parents (76%) said that positive interactions with their children increased. However, 11% of parents experienced a worse connection to their children, and 3% experienced a parent–child relationship that swung between being closer and growing apart.

More than half (58%) of the parents who reported a better relationship had strong concerns about various aspects of

their children's wellbeing after the disaster. These parents compensated by increasing both demandingness (control) and responsiveness (warmth). Parents showed these hallmarks of the authoritative parenting style by safeguarding their children, keeping watch over them, and ensuring that they were present in their children's everyday lives.

Parents established rules to secure the safety of their children. These guidelines comforted families, as both parents and children knew that a set of plans were in place to safeguard the welfare of family members if another disaster occurred. While parents noted the benefits of such rules, they recognized that being too protective could have negative effects. Thus, parents stated the importance of providing opportunities for their children to develop and practise independence as they grow.

Practising authoritative parenting helped parents cultivate and strengthen bonds with their children and ensure that they adjusted in a healthy way after the disaster. Many parents spoke about being "more aware of the precariousness of life" and how disasters can happen unexpectedly. The flood prompted these parents to be more protective of their children while still encouraging their children to be independent. By implementing strategies to protect and nurture their children after the flood through greater demandingness and responsiveness, parents facilitated their children's ability to adapt to the post-flood environment.

How you can use this research

This study suggests a need for programs and services to help families cope in the aftermath of disasters, such as family counselling, peer support, and parenting education. More practical supports are also needed to help families deal with losses, including housing, employment, and other necessities.

About the researchers

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