

Tips for Parents of Hurricane Volunteers

Congratulations on having a child who was inspired to volunteer to help after the hurricanes.

As they volunteer – and even after they return – it will be helpful for you to understand some of the things they may have faced.

Your Volunteer's Emotions

Your young volunteer may be feeling some or all of these common emotions:

- **Sadness** as they see the devastation left behind by the hurricanes or hear the stories of hurricane survivors.
- **Anger** at what seems like a slow recovery or dwindling offers of help for the region.
- **Irritability** as they cope with difficult surroundings and emotions.
- A feeling of **vulnerability** and a feeling that life is fragile or too short.
- A feeling of **guilt** that they have been fortunate while others have not.
- **Numbness** and a feeling that they have reached the limit of how much they can care.

The Emotions of Those the Volunteers Are Trying to Help

Those on alternative spring break may be surprised that, while many of those whom they are helping are welcoming and grateful, not all are. Hurricane survivors may come from a different background and that may shape their reaction to the hurricane's aftermath and to volunteers. Some of the survivors may be feeling the a range of emotions -- including anger and irritability -- and the volunteers may be on the receiving end of that anger.

Managing the Emotions

Odds are that your kids are strong enough to bounce back from whatever comes their way as they volunteer. But here are some things they can do to help themselves.

1. Give themselves a break. Encourage your volunteers to cut themselves -- and their fellow volunteers -- some slack.
2. Know Their Limits. One person can make a huge difference, but it's hard for only one volunteer to change the whole world. Tell your kids that as long as they are doing their best, then they're helping, even if they can't see the results right away. Remind them that sometimes, those affected by the hurricane will need them to simply listen, not to try and fix things.
3. Take care of themselves. The volunteers are making heavy demands on their bodies and emotions. Remind them that they should get enough sleep and eat nutritiously.

4. Buddy Up. It's a good idea for all of the volunteers to compare notes at the end of each day but at a minimum, tell your volunteer to find at least one other person with whom to confide and blow off steam every day.

5. Call home. Your kid may feel like you can't possibly understand what he or she is going through, but this is a good time to be available and to simply listen. You may be able to offer them the perspective they need from someone who isn't too close to the situation, but this will be better received if you have listened first.

6. Set routines. Even though your volunteer is in a temporary and stressful situation, remind them that establishing routines such as having a daily call home or setting aside a regular time just to be alone can help.

7. Look for opportunities for self-discovery and recognize your strengths. Remind your volunteer that people often learn something about themselves and may find that they have grown in some respect as a result of persevering through hardship.

If They're Overwhelmed

Your volunteer may be feeling like the whole experience is more than he or she can handle.

If this is the case, urge your volunteers to come home when they need to, whether or not the alternative spring break is over. And, if they are overwhelmed when they return to the point that their daily life is affected, urge them to talk to someone like a psychologist who is trained to help.

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