

Even kids can have a role in helping after natural disasters

By Sarah Hamaker September 8 at 8:00 AM

The images and stories from the devastation caused by Hurricane Harvey tugged at Arianna Cope's 11-year-old heart. The sixth-grader at St. Leo the Great Catholic School in Fairfax, Va., asked whether her school could adopt a school in Houston to help those students replace supplies and other items.

“We often discuss the concept of ‘greater good,’ and how one single person can change a life — that if you help even one person, then it is worthwhile,” says her mom, Anastasia Cope of Reston, Va. “A Facebook post from a friend in Houston triggered conversations about what she could do to help.”

Arianna's compassionate heart is what we as parents want for our own kids. To raise kids who think of others and want to help, parents should foster compassion and encourage age-appropriate service.

While some kids seem to be born wanting to help others, most need a little push to think and act more compassionately. “As a parent, I want my kids to understand just how fortunate we are and how important it is to give back,” says Christina Moreland, author of [“Secrets of the Super Mom”](#) and a Houston-area resident whose home was spared hurricane damage.

Here are a few ideas to help kids develop hearts that will be stirred to offer assistance when they see a need.

Be a model. “Showing compassion is the best teaching tool there is,” says Robin Goodman, executive director of A Caring Hand, an organization that helps children with grief. Point out needs as you encounter them in your own communities. Identify compassionate acts in others and in your kids, such as sitting by a new classmate at lunch or helping a neighbor with their trash. Talk about ways you as a family could help others both locally and far away.

Read books. “One way to instill the importance of being a valuable member of society is through children’s books that teach these concepts, followed by an activity reinforcing themes of giving, charity and citizenship,” said Shelby Rideout, founder of Bright Signs Learning, an organization that encourages children to read. Suggested titles include “The Giving Tree,” “Have You Filled Your Bucket Today?” and “The Giving Book.”

Redirect compassion. Don’t be too quick to override your child’s compassionate impulses when it’s not feasible, such as your third-grader wanting to travel to Houston to help cleanup efforts. Instead, guide your child into figuring out what he could do. “Ask him what he would need most or want in a similar situation, then help him find an organization doing that,” says Katherine Ludwig, co-author of “Humility Is the New Smart.”

For example, several years ago, my then fourth- and fifth-grade girls had an idea to knit blankets for the homeless. Since their knitting skills were nonexistent, I encouraged them to think closer to home. They then came up with a schoolwide food drive in early November, at a time when supplies at area food banks ran low ahead of the holiday season. Their small effort brought in more than 1,000 pounds of food.

Child-Sized Help

Too often, we adults think that kids need to grow up before they can make a difference, but there are things kids can do. “By giving them something tangible to do, you demonstrate for them that they are not powerless and that sometimes the answer to the suffering in the world can be found right in their own family,” says Penny Hunter, mom to human rights activist Zach Hunter, who started anti-slavery efforts when he was 12.

“Many parents may shrug off a child who has been exposed to a tragedy and now wants to get involved personally,” Ludwig says. Rather than just parents donating money, “encourage a child to act on her compassion.”

That compassion can take on many forms. For example, Morelands’ two kids helped sort and fold clothes that have been donated to help hurricane evacuees. “My 10-year-old son also helped clear a path through the mud to reach a house in Kingwood for people [who were] helping to rip up the carpet get in and out of the house safely,” she says.

What else could kids do?

Make everyday connections. “Look for ways you can help that tie-in to your kids’ everyday experiences or needs,” Hunter says. That could translate into kids holding underwear or sock drives for those affected by a natural disaster.

Raise money. Children can donate part of their allowance or earn extra money through lemonade- or bake-sale stands, dog walking or other chores. Help kids designate a reputable charity for the proceeds.

Look to your own back yard. Yes, communities hit by Harvey and Irma need assistance, but so do local groups. Find out what touches your kids’ hearts, then connect with an area charity. “Now is a great time to increase awareness in one’s own community about local needs, such as bringing food to a local food bank or donating toys to a shelter,” Goodman says.

Personal messages. Kids can make handmade cards and letters to send to area hospitals, schools, fellow scout groups, and military and emergency service personnel. My girls’ American Heritage Girls troop will be sending notes to sister troops in the Houston area later this month.

“Kids naturally have immense capacity for empathy, compassion and a desire to help other people who are suffering, such as those devastated by Hurricane Harvey,” says Ludwig. Let’s help them help others.