

How to Prepare for a Hurricane When You Have a Child With Autism

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My house after Hurricane Gustav

This post is written by Shelley Hendrix, Autism Speaks' Director of State Advocacy Relations. She currently resides in Baton Rouge, La. with her two children, Liam and Mairin. Liam was diagnosed with autism age the age of two in 1998. She began advocating on behalf of her son and other children with autism almost from day one.

This week marks the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, the nation's largest natural disaster to date. Our own family was severely affected by the storm. Katrina ripped off portions of our roof and the siding from our house but the most destructive part came a few days after the storm when crews were clearing sewer lines pumping gallons of raw sewage into our home. We were without indoor plumbing for close to four months.

I was completely unprepared for Katrina and did not respect it for the storm that it was. As a result, we were looking for food supplies and water from neighbors because we were so sick of drinking diet strawberry-flavored soda water which was all they had left at the store when I got there. People don't realize that when a storm like this hits that it can take days to start to get shipments of food and water back into an area. Baton Rouge is located approximately 60 miles northwest of New Orleans. I never imagined that a storm of that size could create such a disaster with us living that far inland.

Three years later our home suffered extensive damage with Hurricane Gustav. A neighbor's tree landed on the back of our home and this time we had to move out for nearly seven months while it was repaired.

With Hurricane Earl bearing down on the eastern seaboard in a couple of days, we wanted to take the time to remind families how important it is to evacuate. The damage from Hurricane

Gustav taught me that. While we weren't at as much risk for wind or flooding damage from that storm, I never would have expected a tree located nearly 80 feet from my home to cause that much of a disaster in our lives. If we had been home we could have been killed easily. I was so grateful that we were not and will never ride out one of these mega-storms again.

Evacuating with a child with special needs, riding out the storm or surviving the weeks of no electricity that follow are stressful and difficult. Our children depend on routine and there is nothing that obliterates a routine like a hurricane. Weeks without electricity make cooking and daily life very difficult.

You have to plan ahead.

Some lessons we learned following these recent storms that we would like to pass on to our East Coast buddies from the Gulf South include:

- 1) **Be prepared!** Stock up on food supplies and water. Make sure you have enough to go for at least a week to 10 days. One gallon of water per person.
- 2) **Fill up your bathtubs** so that you are able to flush your toilets.
- 3) **Make sure you have your important documents** – including birth certificates, insurance documents and IEPs in a safe and handy place. If you evacuate, bring this with you in the event that you have to relocate temporarily after the storm passes.
- 4) **Fill your car with gas** and save a couple of gallons at your home if possible.
- 5) During the days leading up to the storm **withdraw as much cash from your bank's ATM as possible each day** so that you will have cash on hand. We forget sometimes the luxuries that electricity bring like the use of credit cards, which are rendered useless in a post-storm, cash-based economy.
- 6) **Stock up on charcoal** so that you can cook on the grill.
- 7) If you evacuate, **put all of the things in your refrigerator in a garbage bag and put the bag back in the fridge**. If you aren't able to return for a week, you will thank us that all you have to do is hold your nose and grab one bag out of the fridge/freezer.
- 8) If you evacuate to a shelter, **consider going to a shelter at a church or school where your family might be able to have a quieter, more private Sunday School/classroom**. Sitting in a large gymnasium with lots of people can be extremely stressful for our children.
- 9) **Be sure to pack enough medication** for two weeks and be sure you have prescription numbers for refills if needed.
- 10) **Make sure to have first aid supplies on hand** and readily available – including mosquito repellent (because they are awful after the storm hits) and sunscreen.

- 11) **Don't get all caught up in the hype.** Don't get overly dramatic. Parents that are stressed out invariably stress out their kids. The more calm you can be, the better your children will be able to handle this disruption in their lives.
- 12) **Stock up on batteries and flashlights.** Candles can be used if your kids will stay out of them. Mine never did so we use flashlights only.
- 13) **Do not go outside to go look around.** It is everyone's first thought to go outside after a storm to survey damage but don't bring the kids outside until you know it is safe. Downed power lines can be everywhere for days and it is difficult to determine which ones are live.
- 14) **Be careful about snakes and insects** – especially bees, wasps and fire ants because their homes have been disrupted too and they are likely looking for new ones ... and stressed out and angry too!
- 15) **Pull out that battery operated radio** from the 1980s that you have stored in your garage to stay informed of the storm's progress.

You can find an excellent **evacuation checklist** [here](#).

We encourage all families to evacuate and stay safe during this hurricane season!