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# Global Disasters: Helping Children Cope

Global disasters, like massive earthquakes, tsunamis or storms, can have a strong emotional effect on people around the world. The scale of the physical devastation and the loss of life in large disasters are disturbing even for those not directly affected by the event. Like adults, many children and youth try to comprehend the scope of such tragedy and understand how it relates to them. Common reactions include sadness, concern over a large scale disaster occurring at home, and the strong desire to help.

Although most children will be fine, some may need additional support from adults because of their personal circumstances, in particular those who come from or may have lost loved ones in the affected areas. Extended family is extremely important in many cultures and many immigrants have strong ties to family back home. Adults can help children by supporting their emotional and psychological needs, helping them understand the events factually, and providing the opportunity to process their reactions, as needed.

## FOR ALL CHILDREN

Identify vulnerable populations. The degree to which children are affected will vary depending on personal circumstances. Most vulnerable are children who:

- Had family members killed, injured, or missing in the disaster.
- Originally come from or have family still living in devastated communities.
- Have a strong sense of religious or cultural identity with the affected countries.
- Are survivors of other natural disasters, particularly in potentially vulnerable areas.
- Have recently lost a loved one, particularly a parent.
- Suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder, depression or other mental health disorder.

Talk to your children and students. At home or in class, take the time to discuss events factually. Use a map or globe and provide relevant information about seismology, geography, cultural issues, emergency and public health services, etc. Allow children to discuss their feelings and concerns and encourage questions. Even children who do not know anyone hurt may experience a sense of loss or grief, may feel at risk themselves, or be concerned that such major disaster can happen with little to no warning. Acknowledge and normalize their feelings. A caring listener is important. Let them know that others share their feelings and that their reactions are common and expected.

Be a good listener and observer. Let children guide you as to how concerned they are or how much information they need. If they are not focused on the tragedy, don't dwell on it. But be available to answer their questions to the best of your ability. Young children may not be able to express themselves verbally. Pay attention to changes in their behavior or social interactions. Most school age children and adolescents can discuss their thoughts and feelings although they may need you to provide an "opening" to start a conversation.

Highlight people's compassion and humanity. Large-scale tragedies often generate a tremendous outpouring of caring and support from around the world. Focus on the aid being provided by governments, non-profit aid agencies, and individual donors. Discuss the truly Herculean logistical

process of getting aid to the most impacted areas and the cooperation between leaders and people of so many nations.

Do something positive with your children or students to help others in need. Taking action is one of the most powerful ways to help children feel more in control and to build a stronger sense of connection. Suggestions include making individual donations to international disaster relief organizations, holding a school or community fundraiser, or even working to support families in need within the community.

Emphasize people's resiliency. Help children understand the ability of people to come through a tragic event and go on with their lives. Focus on children's own competencies in terms of their daily life and in difficult times. In age appropriate terms, identify other disasters from which communities or countries have recovered.

Be honest. Acknowledge your feelings about the event. Be sure your comments are age appropriate but even young children will feel more reassured and closer to you if you are honest. For older children in particular, it is okay to admit that you feel sad, perhaps a little helpless that you cannot do more to make a difference, or even awed at the sheer power and violence of nature. Balance statements of concern with information about our emergency preparedness and response systems here at home.

Monitor the news. It is important to stay informed, but exposure to endless news may not be helpful. Images of the disaster itself and the resulting human suffering from injury, hunger and disease can become overwhelming. Young children in particular cannot distinguish between images on T.V. and their personal reality. Older children may choose to watch the news, but be available to discuss what they see and help put it into perspective. They may also prefer to ignore the news and watch music videos. This is okay.

Spend family time. Being with family is always important in difficult or sad times. Even if your children are not significantly impacted by this tragedy, this may be a good opportunity to more consciously participate in and appreciate family life. Doing things together reinforces children's sense of stability and connectedness.

#### FOR CHILDREN PERSONALLY IMPACTED

Children who have lost a loved one or are connected to devastated communities may need extra support. The following information can help teachers and parents support the needs of these children. For detailed information about helping children cope with loss and grief, see *Helping Children Cope With Death, Loss and Grief*.

Recognize potential grief, anxiety, and stress. These students may be grieving for loved ones, anxious about family members that are injured or unaccounted for, or concerned about the future of family members whose communities were destroyed. In some cases, family members here may be traveling overseas to help relatives in need or perhaps bring orphaned children from the family back to the United States. This level of distress may be very disruptive and result in inattention in class, poorer grades, changes in behavior, or even school absences. The situation may also take a good deal of time to resolve. Teachers should determine what extra support or leniency students need and work with parents to develop a plan to help students keep up with their work.

Provide students the opportunity to express their feelings. This could include participating in general class discussions and activities but doing so may not be appropriate for everyone. Students

should also have the opportunity to meet in small groups or individually with the school psychologist or counselor.

Maintain as much continuity and normalcy as possible. Allowing students to deal with their reactions is important but so is providing a sense of normalcy. Regular classes, after school activities, and friends can help students feel more secure and better able to function.

Enable students to take action. Even more than students not directly impacted, children who have suffered a loss may feel compelled to do something to make a difference. Their focus is likely to be on family as well as the larger affected community. They can help organize fundraisers within the school or at least work with classmates who are, provide information to classmates about specific community needs, write articles for the school newspaper, etc. Doing something positive and knowing that their classmates want to help as well can strengthen students' sense of hope and belonging.

Respect cultural issues and boundaries regarding crisis and death. Many immigrant families are part of a close-knit, often faith-based community. Determine what support system students have access to and what are appropriate forms of support from school personnel or members of the broader community. Schools may be able to help link isolated students or families to relevant cultural support systems. (See Cultural Issues in Death and Culturally Competent Crisis Response: Information for School Psychologists and Crisis Teams.)

Make mental health services available. Depression, anxiety, and stress are natural reactions to crisis and loss. Many students will be fine with the support of their families and community but others will need more specific mental health support. For many immigrant families, school is the only place where they have access to mental health services. The school psychologist can provide or help arrange for appropriate counseling. They should also identify and make referrals to community mental health resources as necessary. Teachers should not try to counsel students who seem to be struggling emotionally but should refer them to the school psychologist or counselor. Services should be culturally appropriate.

Be willing to discuss the concept of death. Children may be more concerned about dying or a loved one dying, particularly if large numbers of children are among the deaths. Talking with them is important. Outside resources can be very helpful (e.g., books geared to different ages that explore death and dying, grief and hospice organizations, or your faith community, if part of your family life). If a child comes from a home with a resilient belief system or faith, it will likely provide a powerful source of support when it comes to dealing with these issues.

Understand the grief process. Grieving is a process, not an event. Everyone grieves differently and not all children within a developmental age group understand death in the same way or with the same feelings. Children's view of death is shaped by their unique view of the world and experiences. Expressions of grief include emotional shock, sorrow, withdrawal, regressive behavior, anger or acting out, and disbelief/denial. (See *Helping Children Cope with Death, Loss and Grief*.) Students should be given the opportunity to express their grief through playacting or arts and crafts (for younger children) and through art, drama, music, and writing for older elementary children, adolescents, and youth.

Know potential child/adolescent reactions to trauma. Most children will be able to cope with their concerns over current events with the help of parents and other caring adults. However, some children may be at risk of more extreme reactions because of personal circumstances. Symptoms may differ depending on age. Adults should contact a professional if children exhibit significant changes in behavior or any of the following symptoms over an extended period of time.

- Preschoolers—thumb sucking, bedwetting, clinging to parents, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, fear of the dark, regression in behavior, withdrawal from friends and routines.
- Elementary School Children—irritability, aggressiveness, clinginess, nightmares, school avoidance, poor concentration, withdrawal from activities and friends.
- Adolescents—sleeping and eating disturbances, agitation, increase in conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behavior and poor concentration.

Help children support their friends. Seeing a friend coping with a loss may scare or upset children or youth who have had little or no experience with death and grieving. Young children may need help understanding the concept of death and why their friend is sad. Children of any age may need help to communicate condolence or comfort messages. Help them decide what to say and reassure them that simple expressions of sympathy and offers of support are fine. Help children anticipate some changes in friends' behavior. It is important that they understand that their grieving friends may act differently, may withdraw from their friends for a while, might seem angry or very sad, etc., but that this does not mean a lasting change in their relationship. Encourage them to invite their friend to do "regular" activities like going to the movies or playing sports. Spending time friends may offer a much needed distraction and sense of normalcy.

Encourage children who are worried about a friend to talk to a caring adult. This can help alleviate their own concern or potential sense of responsibility for making their friend feel better. Children may also share important information about a friend who is at risk of more serious grief reactions. Additionally, for children who have experienced their own loss (previous death of a parent, grandparent, sibling), observing the grief of a friend can bring back painful memories. These children also are at greater risk for developing more serious stress reactions and should be given extra support as needed.

#### Resources

All handouts referenced above can be accessed at [http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis\\_safety/index.aspx](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/index.aspx). There are many organizations and agencies with helpful information about helping children and families cope with natural disasters and other crises. There are also numerous ways to donate to international relief agencies online.

- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry <http://aacap.org>
- American Red Cross <http://www.redcross.org>
- Federal Emergency Management Agency <http://www.fema.org/>
- National Association of School Psychologists [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)

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