

Global Disasters and Helping Children Cope

When major global disasters such as the earthquake in Haiti occur school age children typically exhibit reactions including personal sadness, concern over the disaster occurring here as well and a strong desire to help.

Most children will be fine; however some may need additional adult help because of specific risk factors or connections to the affected area such as Haiti.

Generally adults can help by supporting the children emotionally, helping them understand the event factually and being open to their questions

Students most vulnerable to being affected by a disaster such as the present one in Haiti, are those having family members in Haiti, originally came from there, have a strong cultural identity with the area, survived other disasters, have lost loved ones or have personal mental health issues such as depression.

Parents and teachers may talk to their children about relevant information regarding the culture of Haiti, its geography history, emergency and public health services. This factual information may give them more understanding about the situation. At the same time ,

while they may be concerned that an earthquake can occur with little or no warning, acknowledge that those feelings are common and expected.

Young children may not express concerns verbally so be observant and a good listener. Pay attention to any change in children's behavior. Most school age children can express their thoughts but may need you to open the conversation.

Focus on people's compassion and humanity, such as aid being provided by non-profit agencies and the huge effort involved by many countries in the world. Individually and as schools, students may take actions, such as raising money for the relief effort. This is a powerful response to make children feel more in control and build a healthier sense of responding. It gives us a sense that we can make things better and are not helpless in the face of tragedy.

Emphasize the resiliency of people. That is how people survive major tragedies and overcome major obstacles. We think of the Halifax Explosion and Boston's response of support that is remembered annually by Nova Scotia sending down a Christmas tree for the Boston Commons. More recently we are reminded of the resiliency shown by the citizens of New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Especially with older children it's alright to admit limitations when such as an earthquake happens, while emphasizing the safety of our community, including building standards, emergency response, medical facilities.

Parents should monitor their child's time watching media coverage of the tragedy. Images of the disaster can be overwhelming. It's good to be informed but exposure to endless news may not be helpful, especially for those with pre-existing trauma risk. Young children, in particular, may not distinguish television images from their personal reality.

Older children may watch the news and discuss the issues with you or they may just listen to their I-Pod.

Family time is always important during any difficult time. It reinforces security and caring.

For Children Personally Involved

We recognize that grieving for loved ones and anxiety over lost family members and worry over the devastating effect on Haitian communities is a natural reaction to this tragedy. It can be disruptive and result in inattention in class, poorer grades, changes in behavior, or increased school avoidance. It may take a good deal of time for these children to adjust.

Teachers may initiate extra support or leniency for these students and communicate more with their parents to keep them engaged in school work.

Provide students opportunities to meet the counselor individually or in small groups of those similarly affected. Participating in general class discussions and activities may be appropriate for some but not for everyone personally affected.

Maintain continuity for all students, including regular classes and after school activities. Friends can help students feel more secure and better able to function.

As for all students, help them get involved in doing something to make a difference. Doing something positive and knowing their classmates want to help, can strengthen students' sense of hope.

Determine support systems students have access to, and what are appropriate forms of support from school personnel. Schools may link isolated students or families to relevant cultural support. Many immigrant families are part of a close knit community.

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.

If children are personally affected and are concerned about death, and indeed, children dying, talking with them in an age appropriate manner is important. Children supported by a resilient belief system or faith, can find this a powerful source of support at this time.

Grieving is a process and everyone grieves differently. They may present shock, sorrow, withdrawal, aggressive behavior, anger, acting out or denial. They need a chance to express that grief.

Most children, with the help of their parents can cope. If significant behavioral changes persist over a period of time, then professional help should be requested .Symptoms in elementary children may include irritability, distraction, aggressiveness, clinginess, withdrawal from activities and school. For adolescents, sleeping and eating disturbances, physical complaints, agitation, poor concentration may be symptoms.

Finally help fellow students support their friends by helping them decide what to say and reassure them those simple expressions of sympathy and offers of support are fine. By spending time with a friend who is coping with loss, they provide both a distraction and normalcy.

If they are worried about a friend they should talk to their teacher, a guidance counselor, or their parents.