

Resources for Talking with Children about Disasters, Fears, and God's Love

1) Talking with Kids About Natural Disasters...

Get Them to Open Up, Treat Fears as Real, Help Them Cope

From Rob Sauls, "ShoeStrings Kid's Ministry Newsletter"

As the death toll from the December 26 tsunami climbs towards 150,000, how do you as parent, teacher, leader, and/or minister help your children understand this horrible tragedy? Will you address their fears and guide their understanding that God is still in control and cares for people everywhere? How will you respond?

You could:

- Ignore their questions and act as if nothing happened.
- Treat them with non-informative responses like: "Don't worry about it! - What did you get for Christmas? - God is an awesome God!"
- When asked about tragedies, address each question with an informed answer - not your best "uninformed" guess. If you don't know, say you don't know. Then invite them to explore with you, "Let's learn about it together...or Let's pray for the victims and for our understanding."

Much of the following is adapted from conference materials that I have assembled, my readings and from talks with Christian educators.

"What is a tsunami?"

Consult some reference books at your child's level of understanding.

Japanese, from tsu harbor + nami wave: a great sea wave produced by submarine earth movement (earthquake) or volcanic eruption.

"Disasters are never so ugly as when you try explain it to children!"

As with the 9/11 tragedy and the with the war in Iraq, children want to know, "Where is God in all of this?" We all want answers and children are no exception. Some of the answers you may not want them to have and most will not be theologically sound.

Children have expectations, not only of their parents, but also of their Christian leaders. Children want to know from trusted adults, "what you know," "what you think," and "where is God in all of this?"

"You just can't predict what kids are thinking!"

You don't need to go into details, into ocean tides/ waves/plate tectonics. But you do have to accept the fact that kids are aware of things. Help a child understand how you deal with this world, how you deal with stress, and how the comfort of God comes to you.

A little over a year ago, I ran across these thoughts from a good friend. "Consider your child's temperament," says Jerry Aldridge, PhD, a child development specialist with the University of Alabama at Birmingham.*

"Some children are more fearful of everything, while others are very outgoing, flexible, and nothing frightens them," said Aldridge. "While their basic temperament will not change, the fearful child can feel safer with your help."

Get kids to open up. Accept fears as real. Some parents/leaders may feel compelled to "sweep away" all the bad stuff. That's being unfair to the child, and may lead to unhealthy coping patterns. We need to

help children accept that sometimes we all feel sad and angry. When they feel afraid, say, "Yeah it's scary and it's okay to be scared!"

"Remind your children that you are working very hard to protect them from harm and that God is with them all the time," says Aldridge.

"Teach children to cope."

Tell them how you cope yourself -- that you sometimes take a walk, listen to music, read the Bible, pray, cry, take a bath, make a cup of tea, sip on hot chocolate or coffee. Tell them, "I pray when I get upset. And when you're upset, you can pray, or come to me, and we will pray together."

Set a good example. Do something to make "the bad situation" better.

You might lead your kids to get involved by writing letters, collecting and sending food and supplies. These actions give children a feeling that their parents/leaders have hope and more importantly, these actions show children that something can be done to help people in Jesus' name.

"Turn off the TV."

"Too many families, to get the latest news, leave the TV on 24 hours a day," says Aldridge. "That's what happened after Sept. 11. Children saw the same images over and over again, which was very frightening for them. Talk with your children, pray with them, and remind them of God's love for everyone."

Since 1980, RoB has served churches in Georgia, Tennessee and Missouri as Preschool/Children's Minister, Minister of Education, Associate Pastor, and Family Minister. RoB has dedicated himself to helping you and your church in becoming everything God wants you to become. Contact RoB at rob.shoestrings@gmail.com.

ShoeStrings Kid's Ministry is designed to help churches keep their children, their families, and their leaders tied closely to God. Our primary focus is on Preschool, Children, and Family Consulting and/or Conferencing.

2) Catherine Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey*, (Baker Books, 1998)

3) Helpful Essays...check out the links...

American Academy of Pediatrics offers advice on [communicating with children](http://www.aap.org/advocacy/releases/disastercomm.htm) about disasters.
<http://www.aap.org/advocacy/releases/disastercomm.htm>

American Psychological Association - "[Resilience in a Time of War](http://www.apahelpcenter.org/featuredtopics/)" and other articles about resilience and managing stress. <http://www.apahelpcenter.org/featuredtopics/>

The Parent Center - [How to talk to your kids about the terrorist attacks](http://parentcenter.babycenter.com/refcap/bigkid/graisinggreatkids/1390742.html). This also applies to other disasters. <http://parentcenter.babycenter.com/refcap/bigkid/graisinggreatkids/1390742.html>

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry - [Helping children and adolescents after a disaster](http://www.aacap.org/publications/DisasterResponse/index.htm) <http://www.aacap.org/publications/DisasterResponse/index.htm> This is a fabulous index of help articles and resources.

Talking about the Tsunami with children. http://www.beliefnet.com/story/158/story_15881_1.html
Wonderful advice here!

3) From Child Care and Development Division, [Children's Defense Fund](#), Washington, DC

--Continuously reassure your children that you will help to keep them safe.

--Turn off the TV. Overexposure to the media can be traumatizing. If your older children are watching the news, be sure to watch with them.

--Be aware that your child's age will affect his or her response. Adolescents in particular may be hard hit by these kinds of events. Obtaining counseling for a child or adolescent soon after a disaster may reduce long-term effects.

--Calmly express your emotions, but remember that a composed demeanor will provide a greater sense of security for your child.

--Give your children extra time and attention and plan to spend more time with your children in the following months.

--Let your children ask questions, talk about what happened, and express their feelings.

--Play with children who can't talk yet to help them work out their fears and respond to the atmosphere around them.

--Consider how you and your child can help. Children are better able to regain their sense of power and security if they feel they can help in some way.