

## **Tips for Parents When Children are Confronted with Disaster, Crisis and Loss**

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The headlines scream “Disaster!” and the TV images are continuous images of flood, devastation and destruction. The words are of death and fear and the violence of nature. Our children hear the words, see the images, and watch our stricken faces for reassurance. We struggle with knowing how to help our children when the terror of natural disaster strikes. These tips are not exhaustive but are intended to give some direction to efforts to help children in these difficult times.

1. **Children need presence.** As much as you feel drawn to the television and newspapers and discussions with other adults, remember that your children need routine and normalcy and your presence with them. Spend time with them in homework, in play, in discussion.
  
2. **Children need information.** Tell your children in age appropriate language the simple facts. “There was an earthquake under the ocean, followed by aftershocks that created enormous waves of water that crashed over the beaches and land and drowned many people including children. Many more people lost their homes and food and water they could drink. Many people are sad and upset about this. That is why you see it on the news all of the time and that is why everyone seems so upset and sad.” Children need information that is simple, direct, and given at their age level.
  
3. **Children need reassurance.** The uncertainty produced by these events is reflected both on the media and in the faces of adults that children trust. Tell your child the truth.  
“This is scary because natural disasters could happen to anyone. But we don’t have any reason to believe that there will be a problem here. They have already put in warning systems here to let people know so they can get to safe places. And you need to know that if something like this were to happen here, we would get through it together as a family.” For those dealing with children in the devastated areas, the conversation might include: “This is scary and very hard. We will get through it together. We don’t expect anything like this to happen again. But experts are working very hard to make sure that there would be a warning if anything like this ever happened again.”
  
4. **Children need security.** Crisis and tragedy are stressful for both children and adults. Children in crisis need warm comforting foods, warm clothes or a jacket, quiet, gentle physical touch. A child who is grieving or struggling with a crisis may need an extra blanket at night or a light on at night. These simple, basic assurances of security are important when possible.
  
5. **Children need context.** Children will remember other losses and grief. They will feel strong feelings about this event and the discussions of it and will need help

putting it into context. Remind your children about the resilience of people, of their nation working together with other nations, of your family, of each of them. We have confronted difficult days before. We will stand together. We will survive. The feelings will get better with time and with expression and with presence.

6. **Children need understanding.** Children grieve in spurts. The intensity of shock and grief is profound and can only be tolerated for brief periods of time. Children will express their anger or sadness or confusion and will then return to some normal activity including play, television, reading, etc. These shifts from griefwork to play and back again are normal and should not be interpreted as a lack of caring or sensitivity on the part of children.

7. **Children need age appropriate intervention.** Children's understanding of death grows as they grow up. Children under the age of 6-7 do not yet understand the permanence of death. They may be confused that others are so upset. They respond to the feelings of the adults and older children around them without understanding the source of the pain. The presence of an adult who is able to comfort the child and direct them to normal activity is important.

Children older than 8-9 years old have an awareness of the permanence and irreversibility of death. They frequently have questions then about what happens after death. Parents should share with these children information that death means that the body doesn't work anymore. Information about life after death should be provided to the child in the context of the parent's belief system.

Adolescents have particular vulnerability to feeling out of control when a tragedy like this happens. Their sense of outrage and injustice is particularly acute. Their sense of threat and responsibility for the world can be a very heavy load. Adolescents need opportunity to acknowledge and discuss these feelings. They need to be reminded about strength and resolve and all that is good in people. They need group....and an opportunity to be in a community of peers.

8. **Children need an opportunity to respond.** Children feel helpless in the face of tragedy like this and want and need the opportunity to do something to make a difference. They need to be allowed to participate in community prayer meetings, making and sending cards and messages to survivors, sending encouraging notes to leaders and rescuers and raising money to send in relief efforts.

9. **Children need hope.** Parents have the perspective of time to share with children. While today may be a grim day and a sad day, there are many good days ahead. We have hope for healing. We have hope for peace. We have hope for courage in the face of difficulty. We have hope for community and for the people of the world.

10. **Children need faith.** At the end of all discussions where tragedy is involved, children more than anyone else know that faith is the essential tool of survival. Parents must use this opportunity to model faith that helps us not despair. We must talk about

our prayer lives, our relationship with God, our confidence in the goodness of God. We must model the concepts of peace and grace and our ultimate belief that our fate rests in the hands of a loving God.