

## **REASSURING OUR CHILDREN**

Suggestions for Responding to our Children at a Time of Disaster

January 2005

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### Introduction

When every movement or change in the world comes instantly to our television and computer screens, the entire human family is included. In times of disaster or crisis, people of faith want to pray and assist and this is as it should be. But we must also address the issues and questions facing our children and families as well.

The current tsunami disaster overwhelmed us all and at a time when we were celebrating and relaxing. The reports and images conflicted greatly with our faith and security. Why wasn't there a warning? How could nature be so violent? Where is God in all of this? How could God allow this to happen? Can this happen to me? What can I do to help? Am I safe in a world of disasters and terrorism?

These are questions children (and adults) are asking. But adults must take the initiative to address the questions and encourage thoughtful consideration. It really is a teachable moment in faith for all of us.

This brief position paper (hurried and informal) submits suggestions for connecting with our children around the issue at hand. It does not offer a parent or guardian canned responses. Rather, it invites one into approaches that are guided by the child's own questions and apprehensions. The parent or guardian should expect to be a learner in this exchange and be unafraid of saying, "I don't know".

### Practical Suggestions

(from the Child Care and Development Division of the Children's Defense Fund of Washington, D.C.)

- 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.
- Keep regular schedules for activities such as eating, playing and going to bed to help restore a sense of security and normalcy.
- 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.

### Theological Considerations

The offerings below are not intended for “proof-texting”. Rather, this material provides minimal biblical background for further research as the parent/guardian considers some theological responses to questions from the children. It is critical to own one’s response out of one’s individual faith experience and understanding. Thus, the texts listed are for descriptive purposes, not prescriptive.

- God did not “do this” to these people. God loves all humans (John 3:16). This is not a “God-problem” (Nancy Walker).
- God set the world into motion after creation and gave us dominion (responsibility, Genesis 1:26-31). We are able to make a response to an imperfect world when trouble happens that we cannot explain. We may never have the answers.
- We are reassured when we remember all the ways in which God takes care of us. (Psalm 136)
- God weeps with us when God’s creation is in disorder. (Isaiah 45:18)
- God is active when we join God in helping each other. (Luke 15:11-32)
- God brings good out of all things. (Romans 8:28)

### Possible Bibliography

*Helping Kids Through Tough Times*, by Doris Standford

*The Hurt that they Feel* by Fred Rogers

*Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey*, by Catherine Stonehouse

*Postmodern Children's Ministry*, Ivy Beckwith

*A Theology for Children*, by William L. Hendricks (an old classic!)

*Nurturing the Souls of our Children* by Thomas F. Geary and Bonnie L. Geary

*FaithCare* by Daniel Aleshire

*Will Our Children Have Faith*, John H. Westerhoff

Resourceful Web Sites (from Rick Bennett of CBF)

American Academy of Pediatrics offers advice on [communicating with children](#) about disasters

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry – [press release about coping with disasters](#) (this PDF file requires Adobe Acrobat Reader)

American Psychological Association – “[Resilience in a Time of War](#)” and other articles about resilience and managing stress

The Parent Center – [How to talk to your kids about the terrorist attacks](#)

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry – [Helping children and adolescents after a disaster](#)

[FEMA Offers Advice On How To Talk To Children About Terrorist Attacks](#) – from the Federal Emergency Management Agency

Other Ideas

- Intergenerational prayer time
- Acknowledgement (through prayers and litanies, etc.) in Sunday School and worship
- Ask what the child's school is doing, if anything
- Provision for ways in which children can assist with gifts of money or appropriate supplies

<p>All expansions and improvements to this document are invited! Let us work with one another to be proactive in the faith formation of our children at such a time as this. The reward is that they will teach us, also!</p>
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