

Dealing with Children and Catastrophic Events

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When something as enormous as the recent tsunami occurs, it is difficult for any of us to comprehend its magnitude. Even contemplating the loss of over a hundred thousand lives is impossible. As adults, we question and discuss and process the events, each in our own way but in somewhat similar progression, until we can face life again with some semblance of understanding and trust in the future.

But we often forget the fact that children may face these things in a somewhat different progression. We are often unsure how to address these issues with kids – or even whether to address them at all. How much do we answer? How can we explain that which we do not understand? How can we help our kids to trust their own future and look forward with hope? How do we minimize the effects of a catastrophe so huge?

Some General Tips

As is always the case, the first thing to be sure of is you. One of the primary findings about kids after a trauma is that they are very much influenced by the moods of their caretakers. Kids will pick up on your anxiety, anger, depression, bitterness, or insecurity. That doesn't mean that you should not feel these feelings or express them, but it does mean that you must be in control of them. In fact, this is a time when the adults around the child have the opportunity to model the fact that one can have feelings without being overwhelmed by them. If you feel that

you are not in control of your feelings, talk to your spouse or your friends or a counselor, but don't express those feelings to your children. The best way to be sure that your child is learning to control his or her emotions is to be sure you are controlling your own. Children rely on and need the strength and competence of their parents and teachers. For children, the notion that the adults around them have lost their strength and competence can be close to shattering and is extremely anxiety-producing.

Second, remember that what is different about this experience is not that it is frightening. Children are often frightened: they may see a scary movie, fall from a tree, get yelled at by someone big or forget their homework and fear the consequences. What makes this type of trauma different is that it is sudden, unpredictable, uncontrollable and universal. Not only is the child unprepared for the event, nobody around him is prepared for it. Not only is the child helpless, he or she may perceive that the adults are also helpless. The normal progression of events, the predictability of the world, has been threatened. Thus, it is not the fear itself that is debilitating. It is the existence of these other factors, attached to the fear that may make it more significant than an everyday fearful event.

There is no single response to a catastrophic event, but children often exhibit emotional, behavioral, or even physical responses that indicate they are having problems processing it. About eighty percent of children will be back to

normal within a few weeks, but some will continue to have difficulty. How and how much children react will of course depend on their age, but other factors are also important. The degree of difficulty adjusting will also be related to the child's temperamental sensitivity: the child who is normally fearful or more emotionally reactive will naturally be more responsive to such an event. Also important is the child's connectedness to the event: the child with a friend, family member, or schoolmate who had personal experience with the event will be more immediately and seriously responsive. Obviously, kids who were in affected areas during the tsunami or who have been personally exposed to the disaster will have a more serious response. Finally, kids who were previously experiencing difficulty in another area of their lives – family discord, problems at school, death of a family member, or any other problem – may display even more difficulty with the initial problem, as the catastrophic event combines with other problems.

Infants and Toddlers

Very young children are, of course, not likely to be exposed to or understand most of the news surrounding a natural disaster of this sort. Nonetheless, they may be affected by the emotional context of the household – not only influenced by parents but also by siblings, domestic helpers or others in the environment. It is true that, at this age, children tend to be primarily concerned with their own needs and desires and less aware of problems related to others. However, even day-old infants will pick up on the emotions of others in their physical proximity and will cry in response to another's distress.

In order to minimize effects on infants and toddlers, parents should do the following:

- Remain as calm as possible when dealing with the child. Try to avoid discussing or thinking about the event while feeding or playing with the child.
- Establish routine as quickly as possible and maintain that consistent routine.
- Do not watch television about the event while your child is in the room, and do not leave magazines or newspaper articles with pictures of the event in places where the toddler can find them.
- If your toddler does ask a question about the event, answer it briefly and calmly, using words that your child will understand. For example, you can say that some people got hurt because there was an accident. However, do not bring up the event or impose it on the toddler.

Preschoolers

Unlike infants and toddlers, children aged three to six are certainly likely to hear and understand more about what has happened. They also have an understanding and fear that what has happened to others might happen to them. For example, they may feel a great deal of anxiety that their house will fall down or that they will get hit by a wave. They are able to imagine what they might feel like in such an event and be very fearful of being hurt or being separated from their parents. Children in this age group may believe that something bad has happened as

“punishment” for some bad act, and may not understand that the event was random and unprovoked or undeserved.

You may see many indications that a young child is being affected by this tsunami. He or she may become more “clingy.” Kids may exhibit regressive behaviors (such as thumb-sucking or toilet accidents) that they had previously outgrown. They may have nightmares or disruptions to their sleep, or they may feel the need to sleep with their parents for a time. You may see changes in appetite, increased agitation or fighting between siblings, fear of being alone, or increased sensitivity and reactivity to sudden noise. Some kids may have stomach aches, headaches or fatigue.

In order to minimize effects on three to six-year olds, parents should do the following:

- Severely limit exposure to television and newspaper reports about the tsunami. Kids this age are very concrete and may not understand that repeated replays of the event are actually depicting only one incident: they may feel that if they’ve seen it five times it has happened five times (and could happen again). If your young child does happen to see televised news of the event, be sure that a parent or responsible (and responsive) guardian is in the room and ready to explain or answer any questions that come up.
- Feeling safe and securely connected to parents will be important during this time. It is a good idea to eliminate parents’ travel and to spend an increased amount of time with the child for a few weeks.
- Even at this age, it helps children to feel that they have some power to make a change for the better. Children can draw a picture, write a letter, or say a prayer to help the victims.
- Respond to questions clearly and calmly, limiting the scope of your answers to the questions asked. Similarly, do not avoid questions if your child brings them up, but do not force the child into discussion or bring up the topic gratuitously.
- Spend extra time together – cook, play a game, do a puzzle, or watch a video.
- Do not assume that children this age understand what has happened. When they ask questions, encourage them to talk about their understanding of the event so that you can be sure to catch any misperceptions they might have.
- Reassure them that they are safe and that these events are very rare.
- Do not lie or minimize the event. Truth is important, and anything you lie about will be caught later and may seem even more dangerous because you attempted to hide it.
- Similarly, do not lie about your own feelings. It is okay to tell your child that you feel sad or that you feel like hugging him close because of the tsunami, as long as you aren’t sobbing when you say that.
- Do not make fun of or criticize regressive behaviors. Be flexible

about such things as sleeping with parents or wanting to stay close for awhile. Wait a few weeks before trying to gently re-impose previous rules.

- Validate feelings, but do not strengthen them. For example, if a child says he is scared, you might answer, “I can understand how you would feel that way, and sometimes I feel that way too. I’m glad I don’t feel that way all the time!”
- Call the tsunami a tsunami. Do not call it a “bad wave,” unless you want your child to be fearful of the ocean for the rest of his or her life. “Tsunami” is an unusual word and it is an unusual event. If you create an image of this devastation being caused by a wave – that which the child encounters every time he or she approaches the beach – then the child will always be waiting for the next “bad wave.” Similarly, avoid the use of the word “wave” when you explain the tsunami. You might say, for example, that a tsunami is when the ocean rises and comes onto the land much farther than normal, knocking down things in its path.
- Reassure the child of the unusual nature of the event, noting that there has never been a tsunami like this in your entire life or in the grandparents’ whole lives and there probably will not be another one of this size in the child’s life.
- Explain to the child that this recent tsunami is gone and that it will not come back. Someday there might be other tsunamis, but they probably will not be as

big nor in his or her part of the world. This one is gone.

The School-Aged Child (Ages 6-12)

The primary-school child is exposed to much more information, speculation and rumor than the preschooler, and it will be very difficult to limit the information he or she receives. At this age, children are still very concrete in their understanding and approach, and they look to parents and teachers as the ultimate authority figures to explain and to be able to fix any problems that arise. They are also very simplistic in their moral assumptions, quick to judge themselves or others when they do not have what they perceive to be a “good” response.

Kids this age are in what the Psychologist Erikson called the stage of “Industry versus Inferiority,” when they define themselves in terms of what they can or cannot do. If an event such as this causes adults to feel helpless, imagine the degree of helplessness that will be felt by someone who defines himself in terms of his capabilities. School-aged children may imagine what they would do (e.g., swim to shore, grab a tree, save the sister), and in these imaginations may recognize that their capabilities fall short. (This is particularly true, in the current instance, if your child does not know how to swim.) Many kids this age will be excited by and interested in the tsunami, and may unconsciously feel guilty about this response as they become more aware of the human devastation.

School-aged kids may demonstrate that they are having difficulty in a number of ways. They

may become more irritable and fights with siblings are common. They may exhibit mood swings, mood disorders (anxiety or sadness), or act out behaviorally. They may want to sleep with parents, or develop a fear of separating from their parents for school or for a play date. Sometimes their symptoms are somatic: stomachaches, headaches, or fatigue. They may replay the events or ask repeated questions. They may find it difficult to concentrate in school or to complete homework. Some kids may withdraw somewhat, while others may become more aggressive, argumentative or defiant.

In order to minimize the effects on school-aged children, parents should do the following:

- Listen to your children and answer questions as clearly and completely as possible. You might encourage conversation by asking kids what their friends think about the event.
- Do not judge the child's feelings or actions surrounding the event, but do correct misconceptions about what happened or the causes of the tsunami.
- Watch the child's behavior to see if there are indications of distress that are not being vocalized.
- At this age, detail about the tsunami is appropriate and necessary. Kids can learn about the geological causes of the event and, again, be reassured by their unusual nature. The World Wide Web is a rich source of factual information they can use. However, there are some philosophical questions that we just can't answer, and when those questions come up it is fine to say we just don't know.
- Resist (or laugh about) your own "separation anxiety," and the feeling that you want to remain close to your children. Kids will pick up on your anxiety, and may develop a fear of being on their own.
- Kids may want to repeat the same story or ask the same questions over and over. Be patient with this, as they are attempting to process something particularly difficult for them. What that is may not be immediately apparent to you.
- At this age, also, it is important to establish and maintain consistent routines.
- Regressive behaviors may also appear at this age. Be flexible with these for a few weeks, bringing them up casually after a month or so has passed. Do not mock or criticize childlike behaviors, and don't panic: behavior will probably return to normal after a short while.
- Don't be angry or surprised if kids do not seem to be affected by the events. Many kids this age mask their emotions well. Many others will manage the enormity of the event by processing it slowly over a longer period and being more analytical than emotional in their response. Let them know that their emotional response is okay, even if it appears to be no response at all. Again, validate and accept all emotional responses. If the response is one you share, say so. If it is not one you share, you might say "I

understand why you feel that way, but I don't really feel that way so much. What I feel is..."

- Be honest and don't use words that downplay the event. When you mean that someone died, say he died, not that he "was lost." At the same time, avoid trying to impress kids with the tsunami's magnitude by dramatizing.
- This will be a time that many children this age become fascinated with death and dying. Explain these things as best you can in accordance with your beliefs, again with the reassurance that most people die in their old age.
- If possible, avoid traveling or other prolonged separation from your child for several weeks. If you absolutely must travel, call home often.
- Provide and encourage other activities (such as reading or videogames or sports) that take the child away from thoughts about the tsunami and serve to reassure him or her that normal joyful activities remain.
- When your child is exposed to news about the event and its aftermaths, be sure you or a responsible adult is there to discuss feelings and explain problems.
- One of the primary feelings experienced by this age group is the feeling of helplessness and incompetence. The best remedy for this feeling is to do something that is helpful. Kids can help organize a neighborhood drive for relief materials, donate allowances, write letters, or send care packages. Any contribution

should be greeted with a statement about how important these efforts will be to the recipients.

- Share your own feelings and opinions about the event, again without appearing as though you are incapacitated by them. If you feel helpless, say so. If you are sad, say so. If you feel numb, say so.
- Remember that primary school-aged kids do not have the strong outside support network that adolescents have, but they have much more interest and exposure than younger kids. This means that you need to serve as the "best friend" with whom the school-aged child can talk, vent, or question.
- If you and your family are religious, help them reconnect spiritually by attending your place of worship or services specifically designed as memorials to the event.

In order to minimize the effects on school-aged children, teachers could do the following:

- Hold small-group discussions in which kids are encouraged to express their understanding of what happened and their feelings about it. Do not force participation in these groups, and allow conversation to flow freely.
- Set up a small memorial or create a school project that assists survivors of the tsunami. This encourages kids to feel that they have actively participated in a positive way and discourages a sense of helplessness.

- Validate all feelings as real and do not allow children to criticize or make fun of each others' feelings. Explain to kids that they will not all feel the same way when something like this happens.
- Study the phenomenon of a tsunami, again stressing the unusual pattern of events that made this one so devastating.
- Keep a careful eye on kids who had previous problems, as they are likely to be exacerbated. Kids with attentional problems may pay less attention, behavioral problems will increase, and kids who were depressed or anxious before the event can be expected to be more so after the event. Of course, keep a particular eye on kids who were in significant emotional distress before the event.
- Prohibit talk that is meant to incite or scare other students. Some kids will talk this way as their own method of processing the events, but others will be severely frightened or affected by these statements or stories. Gently correct misconceptions or overstatements, and ask kids who seem to need to dramatize to talk to you about doing that privately.
- Talk about what governments can do or should do to provide a better warning system for these events in the future.
- Kids may ask questions that are shocking or gruesome. Answer calmly and completely, but keep your answers simple and brief.
- As at home, kids at school are likely to ask the same questions repeatedly or tell the same stories repeatedly. As frustrating as this may be, be very patient with responses. When they do this, kids are processing something that has captured their imagination or confused them, and they sometimes need to go over it a number of times in order to complete this process.
- Increase the amount of "breadth" programming for a short period rather than concentrating on new learning. Review materials that will help children to feel a sense of mastery and competence and will increase self-esteem.
- Expect that some kids will have a decline in their school performance as they find it difficult to concentrate or learn new material. Suspend standardized testing, if possible. Reduce homework or reduce homework difficulty.
- Write to parents asking that they alert you to any specific difficulties their child may be facing, whether related to the incident or not.
- The kids in your class depend on you to model competence and the ability to handle feelings. In class, express your feelings but do not become overwhelmed by them. Advise the students that different feelings are okay and expected, even for teachers, but that these feelings will not last forever.

Adolescents (Ages 12 to 18)

In general, adolescents are in the process of separating their own opinions and tastes from those of their parents, but when an event like this occurs they

are often lost as to what to believe or feel. While they may act as though they are not affected or “can handle it,” they are in the age group most likely to understand and question the larger philosophical implications, to relate this to their own mortality, to feel helpless or guilty about their responses, and to relate this event to their own faith in the predictability of the world. In other words, their own enduring personal belief system is at risk.

Adolescents who are affected by this event may become more argumentative, defiant or withdrawn from the family. They may exhibit increased mood swings, depression or anxiety. They are at risk for increased substance or alcohol abuse, and may exhibit signs of a nihilistic hopelessness, spiritual disconnection or cynicism. They may have increased references to death or dying. Some kids may experience a sense of immobility or lack of productivity, difficulty concentrating, irritability or an exacerbation of ongoing current problems.

Like adults, adolescents may also experience “survival guilt” in a variety of forms. The healthy teenager perceives himself as the hero of his own novel and is very idealistic in his expectations of himself. He may perceive his own responses as having been less than generous or compassionate, or he may feel guilty about his relief at escape from being a victim. He may realistically perceive his own inability to act in certain situations, or have wishful thinking about his own capabilities. The teenager may make inaccurate or unreasonable assumptions about what he “should feel” or “should

have done,” and be disappointed in his own performance.

In order to minimize the effects on adolescents, parents should do the following:

- Be available to listen and to talk about the adolescent’s interpretation of events. Be respectful of ideas and opinions expressed, even if you do not agree with them, and take the opportunity to express your own beliefs and opinions. Provide lots of opportunity for open-ended discussion.
- You can gently correct misconceptions or inaccurate information, not by telling teens that they are wrong but by saying, “I got different information – you might want to check that,” or “That’s not what I heard – let’s look it up.”
- Don’t be afraid to discuss (or learn about) the scientific details of the tsunami.
- If your teenager expresses anger (at God, the authorities, incompetence, etc.), don’t argue with him or her. Listen and affirm the feeling. You might say, “Wow. I can tell you are pretty angry. I hope you won’t always feel that way, because it is a sad way to feel, but I sure can see that you feel it now!”
- Be aware that your teenager is listening to and watching your own reaction to the tsunami. Don’t have a discussion with others that contradicts something you have said to the teenager, unless you are willing to admit your own ambivalence.

- Allow and provide activities that are distracting and fun, such as videogames, movies, sports, etc. Remember that it is important for teenagers to remember the joys in their lives.
 - Teens are intimately connected to their friends and use them as primary avenues to processing difficult emotional events. Encourage these connections as much as possible, but try to stay current with them by asking if the friends are okay, what their friends' opinions might be, whether any friends are having particular difficulty, etc. Do not be judgmental of friends, and model a compassionate response to problems.
 - Ironically, this is a time when you have an excellent opportunity to discuss (and examine) your own philosophies and spiritual connections. Teens will have questions about justice, ("why bad things happen to good people"), God's will, continuity, or trust. They will be working these things out with friends, but it is wonderful if you can provide a low-stress "teachable moment" (such as a hike or relaxed lunch or long drive) in which you can talk about your own feelings and beliefs. But remember to be positive and emphasize how rarely such a catastrophic event occurs.
 - Similarly, make sure to provide opportunities to reconnect spiritually through religious activities. If you feel your teen may be having significant difficulty aligning the devastation of the tsunami with his or her previous religious convictions, talk to your clergyman about meeting separately with your teen to discuss these matters. At best, ask your clergyman to work with your child or a group of teens to present a program for younger (or other) children.
 - Combat feelings of helplessness with positive action of some sort – fundraising, donating clothes or materials, or participating in volunteer organizations.
 - As with younger kids, do not be angry or shocked if your teen does not express significant difficulty with the event. He or she may be masking or suppressing feelings, or he or she may simply process these things more slowly. Reassure your teen that responses vary and that whatever response he or she has is normal and okay.
 - Let kids know where you are and connect with them often. Explain that you expect the same from them. If you don't have one already, be sure you establish a simple "emergency plan" for use in case of separation or other problems. With teens, it is easier to establish a sense of safety and security by creating a situation where everyone knows what he is supposed to do.
- In order to minimize the effects on adolescents, teachers and schools could do the following:
- Create a school project in which kids make a positive contribution to the relief effort. Although the degree of participation in this

- project should vary according to interest and commitment of the student, some participation should be required of all students. Strictly speaking, this should not be a voluntary activity, as that would create significant opportunities for later guilt or self-judgment.
- Study the geological causes of the tsunami, again stressing its most unusual nature.
 - Hold small group discussions in which kids are encouraged to express their understanding of and feelings about the event. Allow conversation to flow freely and model respectful acceptance of all points of view. Do not allow kids to criticize or belittle others' feelings, and use this opportunity to point out that we all have different responses and that this is okay.
 - Spend time discussing the political, sociological, religious, or psychological implications of the tsunami, again treating all opinions with respect. You will be faced with many questions that are not answerable or that have no definitive answer, and it is fine to say, "Many people might disagree with me on this, but I believe..." Be careful not to make definitive statements about these issues, as they may differ significantly from the views of the student and/or his family. However, if you note that yours is simply one opinion, you will encourage further discussion.
 - Again, do not allow scary, dramatic, or inflammatory talk. Of course, at this age it is impossible to monitor conversations, but when you overhear something that you believe to be inappropriate you may use that opportunity to point out that some kids may react differently, that such discussion may be unkind, or that you disapprove.
 - Spend time teaching "breadth" topics rather than introducing new material, and suspend important or standardized testing if necessary. Reinforce previously-learned material and give lots of opportunity for kids to experience a sense of mastery.
 - Expect a decline in performance with some teens. Understand that some kids may have difficulty maintaining sustained concentration or paying attention for a few weeks. (This is, of course, especially true for kids who had previous attentional difficulty.) Consider modifying the homework so that it is either shorter or easier.
 - Encourage kids to relate the tsunami to current topics of discussion or interest, such as the possible economic or political impact of the tragedy or the development of a regional early warning system for tsunamis. Invite essays, opinion papers, or other assignments that might help kids to express and analyze their views and beliefs. As always, be nonjudgmental about the content of these papers but look out for misconceptions or significant emotional responses.
 - Keep an eye on kids that had previous difficulties or are encountering significant ongoing

problems, as these are likely to be exacerbated. In particular, watch kids who were previously depressed, self-harming, or had significant behavioral issues.

- Be particularly alert for signs of self-blame or self-criticism, as kids may have unrealistic expectations about what they could have, would have, or should have done.
- If you notice an increase in irritability in the class, use this as an opportunity to point out and explain the psychological consequences of shared trauma.
- For kids in Asia, point out that their positive responses and assistance is important and powerful, and that the entire world will be looking to them (and to their generation) for the solutions to these problems. They are uniquely qualified to address the issues presented by the tsunami (either current or future).
- Write a note to parents asking that they alert you to any special problems that their child might be facing, whether related to the tsunami or not.
- Connect with other teachers and school personnel to be sure you are aware of any students who may be having particular difficulty.

Third Culture Kid Issues

Those of us who are old enough remember clearly where we were when we heard that President Kennedy was shot or when the astronauts landed on the moon or when the space shuttle exploded. Certain events are culturally

universal and all of our contemporaries share at least a part of a common experience.

It is important to note here that kids who live in Asia but have a passport from another country have just experienced a major life event that may not be shared by others in their home country. Children in England, America, France or Germany are hearing about these events, but they are occurring in places that are very foreign and psychologically unreachable. This will not be a major life event for them. Our children are watching the beaches in Phuket with the memory of having been there last spring or with the knowledge that classmates were there. The people depicted on their television screens are not dissimilar from the people they see on their streets. For Third Culture kids, this is a major life event.

For this reason, Third Culture Kids in Asia have become just a little more separated from their own country's culture and a little more tied into the culture of children from all over the world who experience life abroad. As it comes up, it may be necessary to address this with kids. They may find themselves amazed (and judgmental) when their cousin or future colleague or prior playmate does not relate to the significance of the tsunami. They will need to learn to be patient and to recognize that their exposure was different and much more powerful. As is always the case with Third Culture Kids, it is helpful to point out that there does exist a culture of international children and that they are very much a part of that culture. They are not alone or isolated in their perceptions, and as they grow older they will continue to

meet and connect with other Third Culture Kids even when they are back in their own country.

Continuing Difficulties

As was noted above, most kids will have some or many of the problems described for only a few weeks. It goes without saying that if problems worsen or continue beyond that period, parents or teachers should seek professional assistance rather than simply waiting for problems to go away. Continuing behavioral or emotional issues are a sign that the child is having difficulty processing one or several aspects brought forward by the catastrophic nature of the tsunami, which may predict a lifelong change in self-concept or world view. Problems that are retained for a significant period may eventually seem to go away, but may have been processed in an ineffective or counterproductive manner. Use the intensity and duration of the manifested problems as an indicator of the degree of processing difficulty, and find professional help if your child needs it.