Talking With Children About Natural Disasters

By now we’ve all heard of the recent earthquake in Haiti that claimed the lives of more than 200,000 people and left millions more homeless. The stories of loss and devastation will likely leave many children with questions and concerns about the effects of the quake and about their own safety and the safety of their loved ones. As an early childhood professional, it is important to know how to work with parents to help answer those questions and ease children’s fears. Here are some things you can do, along with the help of parents, to help children cope:

**Answer all of their questions.** Children fear what they do not understand, so simply explaining what has happened is the first step in lessening their fears.

- Make sure you explain things in a calm manner and in terms the child can easily understand.
- Let them know that their questions and concerns are valid and important to you.
- Keep the child’s developmental level in mind when talking about disaster. Too much detail may frighten a very young child, while school-age children may actually benefit from more detailed descriptions.
- Be honest in your answers. Children will ultimately discover the truth and may come to distrust your reassurances in the future if you are not up front with them.
- Children may assume that the disaster has occurred close to their home and fear for their own safety and the safety of their loved ones. Make sure they realize that they are safe; use a map or a globe if you think the child will understand.

**Limit media exposure.** The extensive media coverage of the disaster is intended for an adult audience and may not be suitable for young children.

- Do your best to shield them from graphic images. Photos of destruction, injury, and even death are commonplace in media coverage of natural disasters. Remember that for a young child, the image of a destroyed home is frightening enough.
- Watch news stories and commentaries with your children so that you can provide the explanations and reassurances they need to feel safe.

**Maintain daily routines.** The stability and predictability of a routine is very important to children.

- Maintaining a familiar daily schedule is comforting, especially when a child has just seen how unpredictable the world can be at times.
- Give lots of hugs; physical comforts provide a feeling of safety.
- Make sure children are getting adequate sleep, exercise, and nutrition. Anxiety can take a toll on the body, so pay attention to both their emotional and physical well-being.

**Get involved!** Children may want to help those affected by the disaster.

- Knowing that they can team up with people all over the world to help those in need can be really comforting and empowering for children.
- Contact a local or national organization to see how they can help. There are many ways they can contribute to the relief efforts.

Natural disasters can happen anytime anywhere and will likely prompt children to ask many questions, work with parents to help answer their children’s questions and calm their fears. Give parents this flyer so they’ll have something to refer to in the future.

Sources:
- Parent Central Express, January 2010, National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies
- Talking to Children About Earthquakes and other Natural Disasters by David Fassler, M.D., American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry

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