Helping Children Cope in the Aftermath of the Haitian Earthquake

The earthquake in Haiti has affected thousands of people directly and untold numbers of people including children indirectly. The difficulties emerging from this tragedy will be ongoing for some time both in Haiti and the countries that are home to many Haitian immigrants.

The news and staggering images of devastation, the rising death toll, and stories of human suffering are given continuous coverage on television, radio and the Internet. These events have been difficult to watch, yet even more difficult to look away from, while so many continue to experience overwhelming grief and despair.

Our Haitian children in New Jersey are directly affected by this tragedy. Some may have families in Haiti and have received news that many loved ones were killed in the disaster. These families are now left to begin the long journey through grief.

Many are dealing with the anxiety and fear of not knowing their loved one’s fate since communication lines are not operating. Those who know that family members survived the initial earthquake may worry about the dangers of aftershocks or how their loved ones will manage with homes completely destroyed and the shortage of food, water and medical care.

Other school children not directly impacted by this disaster can easily identify with their peers who have lost loved ones or not know whether their family members are safe. A child’s greatest fears of helplessness and abandonment can be triggered upon hearing of this event even though the earthquake occurred far from home.

Parents and school personnel are important sources of reassurance and help in the aftermath of a disaster. The following guidelines are provided to support the efforts of the adults who are dealing with children and teenagers directly and secondarily affected by this terrible tragedy.

**Web Resources for Parents and School Personnel:**
The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: [www.nctsnet.org](http://www.nctsnet.org)
The American Red Cross: [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org)
SAMHSA’s National Mental Health Information Center: [www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov](http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov)
The National Institute on Trauma and Loss in Children: [www.starrtraining.org/tlc](http://www.starrtraining.org/tlc)
Helping Children Cope in the Aftermath of the Haitian Earthquake

Guidelines for Parents to Help Children Directly Impacted by the Earthquake

Parents who are waiting for news about loved ones will understandably be upset and worried. It is essential that you take good care of your own emotional and physical health. Children of all ages are very tuned into their parent’s moods and feelings, and their worry and upset will increase along with yours.

It is important for parents of children who have been directly affected by the earthquake to help their children not only feel safe and protected but also to find an outlet for their feelings that can include anger, fear, helplessness and grief.

- Limit exposure to television and newspaper coverage of the earthquake. The disturbing pictures may be difficult to forget, and the child may think about them even when they don’t want to.
- Encourage children to talk about their feelings and ask questions.
- Ask about their worries and fears, and take them seriously.
- Provide truthful information regarding loved ones if it is known. If there is no information at this time, reassure children that you will tell them what you know as soon as you find out more.
- If you have confirmed information that a loved one has died, tell children the basic facts using words they will understand. Don’t give too much detail about how the person died.
- If you feel you are not up to telling your child yourself, ask someone to help you but if possible, be present when your child is told to offer your support and love. (See the attached guidelines for helping grieving children).
- Offer additional reassurance. During this time children may be afraid to be alone. They often need more attention and physical closeness. Children often have trouble sleeping, and they wake up with nightmares and may ask to sleep in their parents’ room. Making accommodations for this during this stressful time can go a long way in helping children feel safe and secure.
- Watch for signs that your child is struggling and get counseling help if needed (see Behaviors to Watch For section)

Web Resources for Parents and School Personnel:
The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: www.nctsnet.org
The American Red Cross: www.redcross.org
SAMHSA’s National Mental Health Information Center: www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov
The National Institute on Trauma and Loss in Children: www.starrtraining.org/tlc
Guidelines for Parental Self-care

- During times of worry and anxiety as well as times of grief, it is often very difficult to take care of all of the duties of parenting. Ask friends to help out with the children by taking them for play dates or transporting them to school or after school activities. Having a break to focus on your own feelings and needs is essential.
- Although it may be difficult, try to make sure you are eating and drinking lots of water to keep your body nourished and hydrated.
- If you are unable to sleep, contact your doctor to discuss ways of helping you get the rest you need.
- If you feel very upset and unable to cope, talk through your feelings with other adults. Seek help from trusted family members, friends or a member of the clergy.

While the reactions below may be normal during this very stressful time, if you find they are increasing, seek out assistance from a mental health professional.
- Disrupted sleep and appetite
- Increased irritability or increased anger
- Increased physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach problems, nervousness, muscle weakness or feeling very tired
- Feeling like you can’t think straight or remember things
- Withdrawing from others
- Starting or increasing alcohol or drug use
- Feeling hopeless or having thoughts of hurting yourself or killing yourself

(Seek help immediately if you find yourself thinking about or planning suicide. 1-800-273-TALK is an important resource if you are feeling suicidal).

Web Resources for Parents and School Personnel:
The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: www.nctsnet.org
The American Red Cross: www.redcross.org
SAMHSA’s National Mental Health Information Center: www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov
The National Institute on Trauma and Loss in Children: www.starrtraining.org/tlc
Helping Children Cope in the Aftermath of the Haitian Earthquake

Guidelines for Parents to Help Children Not Directly Impacted by the Earthquake

Hearing about a tragic event that affects the lives of other children can be quite upsetting. Children who live in communities where there are many Haitian immigrants are getting a close up picture of the emotional devastation the earthquake has caused in the lives of their peers and their families. The following guidelines are to help parents support their children as they cope and help their friends cope with this disaster.

- Limit exposure to television and newspaper coverage of this event especially programs that show frightening pictures of death and destruction. If your child is older and wants to view newscasts, watch with them so you can discuss what they are seeing.
- Listen to your child’s questions and fears and take them seriously while reassuring them as truthfully as you can. A major concern for children after a disaster is “Am I safe and is my family safe?” Even when a disaster happens far from home, children often worry that the same event can happen in their community. Remember, children feel more vulnerable than adults because of their size and limited life experience. Their fears may seem silly or groundless to adults but may be very frightening to youngsters.
- Talk about family and school plans for various emergencies. Explain what children should do to stay safe. This will help them feel less worried and more in control.
- Maintain a regular routine including mealtime, bedtime and play time.
- Increase playful, life affirming activities at home and in school.
- Discuss the relief efforts and point out the ways that countries from all over the world are coming together to help the Haitian people.
- Decrease a child’s sense of helplessness by encouraging them to find ways of sending aid to those in need and supporting friends who may have family members directly impacted by the earthquake. This can be done through money raising activities for charitable organizations, such as UNICEF, Red Cross, or others listed in your local newspaper. They can also make cards, poems or favorite treats to give to a peer who is in need of emotional support.
- Watch for symptoms of distress that don’t lessen (see Behaviors to Watch for section), and refer children who are struggling for appropriate assistance.
Helping Children Cope in the Aftermath of the Haitian Earthquake

Guidelines for Teachers to Help All Students Impacted by the Earthquake

Teachers can provide a comforting and stabilizing environment by doing what they do best: teaching, listening and caring. The structure and fellowship of school is in itself supportive and healing.

An event that happens to one child affects their peers. A class is a close knit group, and shared difficulties can bring the children closer together and create a deeper sense of caring and compassion for each other.

Students who are worried or anxious can express a lot of different behaviors and emotions. Some have difficulty concentrating and processing information, irritability, nervousness, angry outbursts and aggressive behavior. These behaviors can make it difficult for the child to be in the classroom. The following are some guidelines to help students cope:

- Reduce reminders of the earthquake by limiting exposure to television and newspaper reports especially those that show disturbing images.
- Find out about your students’ and their families’ experiences in the aftermath of the earthquake so you can better understand the child’s behavior and needs.
- Consult with school counselors about problem behaviors in affected students, and develop effective and caring discipline techniques.
- Modify lesson plans, reduce the workload and let the students move at a slower pace. Arrange for extra help or tutoring for students that may be falling behind.
- Talk with other teachers and share information and observations about affected students so those with worrisome behaviors or reactions are spotted and referred.
- Be aware of students who have not been impacted directly by the earthquake, but who may be going through difficult times. Students who have a seriously ill family member at home, or those who have recently gone through the death of a loved one or their parent’s divorce can be very reactive to the news of this disaster. Also, be aware of students who are dealing with mental health disorders such as depression or anxiety. Their struggles may be made worse by the news of the tragedies, and the resultant impact on their peers.
- Maintain regular routines and structure. The predictability is extremely helpful.
- Encourage your students to get good rest and eat healthy food as well as engage in physical exercise and play. Provide times in the classroom for students to listen to soothing or playful music and get up and stretch and move around to help discharge stress.
- Discuss the relief efforts, and accentuate the cooperation of many nations who are providing aid to the Haitian people.
• Decrease students’ sense of helplessness by encouraging them to become involved in efforts to send aid to the people in Haiti. This can be done through money raising activities for charitable organizations, such as UNICEF, Red Cross, or others listed in your local newspaper.

• Watch for symptoms of distress that don’t lessen (see Behaviors to Watch for section). Become familiar with your school’s protocol for referring students who are in need of assistance, and refer children who are struggling for appropriate help.

**What to do if you find out that a student has been notified about the death of a loved one**

In addition to the guidelines above, the following points will also be helpful:

• Call the child and the family, and offer your condolences. Ask the student and the parents what information they would like you to share with the class. Ask the student how their peers can be most helpful to them as they are going through this sad time.

• Reassure the student that you are there to help them manage in school during this difficult time.

• Figure out a private signal with the student that will let you know when they are struggling and need to take a break to see the nurse or the school counselor. Children often don’t want the class to know they are upset.

• Communicate with parents about how their child seems to be doing emotionally, socially and academically. Consult with them about ways that you can further support the grieving process. Parents know their child the best and can be very helpful in giving you suggestions.

• Classmates are often uncomfortable when dealing with a peer that has lost a loved one. Help them understand that their friend needs to feel that they will be treated the same as before, and that they are not different from everyone else because of the death. Let the class know that if their friend brings up the topic, it is ok to talk to them about the death, but they should respect their friend’s wishes if they would rather not talk. Help them identify ways to let their friend know they care like making a card, inviting them over to play or watch a movie, giving them flowers or a stuffed animal.

**Web Resources for Parents and School Personnel:**
The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: [www.nctsnet.org](http://www.nctsnet.org)
The American Red Cross: [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org)
SAMHSA’s National Mental Health Information Center: [www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov](http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov)
The National Institute on Trauma and Loss in Children: [www.starrtraining.org/tlc](http://www.starrtraining.org/tlc)
Helping Children Cope in the Aftermath of the Haitian Earthquake

Behaviors to Watch For

The following reactions can be normal in the days and weeks following a traumatic event. If these reactions are not getting better and are increasing, it can be an indication the child is in need of additional assistance. School counselors and administrators can help guide parents to resources in the community that can help.

- Physical complaints (i.e., headaches, stomach aches, muscle pain and fatigue)
- Increased fears of various kinds including separation from caregivers
- Difficulty concentrating
- Preoccupation with the traumatic event that can come up in drawings, writings, play
- Images of death and destruction that the child can't get out of their mind
- Withdrawal
- Nervousness and irritability
- Increased anger and aggression
- Being afraid to separate from parents even for a short time, or going back to behaviors the child did when they were much younger
- Sleep disturbances including difficulty falling or staying asleep and nightmares
- Eating disturbances including loss of appetite or eating much more than usual

Behaviors listed below are serious and need to be addressed immediately by a mental health professional

- Engaging in risk taking behaviors like reckless driving, or using substances like drugs or alcohol to cope with stress or grief
- Suicidal thoughts or attempts