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The Tragedy in Haiti: Helping Children Cope Tips for Parents and Caregivers

The terrible devastation caused by the recent earthquake in Haiti can be expected to have a range of emotional effects on children here in the United States. Like adults, many children and youth may be struggling to comprehend the scope of the disaster, especially if they have been exposed to the extremely graphic and heart wrenching images in the news. Additionally, some children, particularly in the Haitian American community, have loved ones in Haiti who are missing, injured, dead, or struggling to survive. Others may have family members who have gone to Haiti to try to help. Parents and other caregivers can help children by supporting their emotional and psychological needs, helping them understand the events factually, limiting what they see on television, providing them with the opportunity to talk about their feelings, and most importantly, by establishing a solid sense of safety and security.

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING ALL CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Be reassuring. Children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives. Your reactions are most important. Emphasize that no matter how grave the tragedy and how badly you feel, you will do your best to help everyone get through the disaster. Concentrate on what you can do to help and what is within your circle of influence.

Be a good listener and observer. Let children guide you to learn how concerned they are or how much information they need. If they are not focused on the tragedy, do not dwell on it. However, be available to answer their questions to the best of your ability. Young children may not be able to express themselves verbally. Pay attention to changes in their behavior or social interactions. Most school-age children and adolescents can discuss their thoughts and feelings, although they may need you to provide an opening to start a conversation. You may start by asking such questions as "Where were you when you heard about the earthquake in Haiti? How did you react when you heard about the disaster? How has this disaster impacted you and your family personally?" (See Facts and Cultural Implications for more information.)

Recognize anxiety about the risk of a natural disaster. Younger children may be concerned that the city or town they live in may be impacted by an earthquake. If you live in an earthquake zone, explain that the building codes in the United States are much better than those in Haiti and our structures are more able to withstand damages without collapsing. If you live in an area that is prone to major floods, fires, or hurricanes, then explain to them that if a natural disaster of this type strikes, the family will likely have enough time to plan and to take necessary precautions.

Monitor the news. It is important to stay informed, but exposure to endless news reports is not helpful. Images of the disaster itself and the resulting human suffering from injury, hunger, and disease can become overwhelming. Young children in particular may not be able to distinguish between images on television and their personal reality. Older children may choose to watch the news, but be available to discuss what they see and to help put it into perspective. They may also prefer to ignore the news and to watch music videos or to engage in other age-appropriate activities. This is okay.

Emphasize people's resiliency. Help children understand the ability of people to come through a tragic event and go on with their lives. Focus on children's own competencies in terms of how they coped in daily life during difficult times. In age-appropriate terms, identify other disasters from which people, communities, or countries have recovered. Emphasize the ingenuity, creativity, and resiliency of the citizens of Haiti.

Highlight people's compassion and humanity. Large-scale tragedies often generate a tremendous outpouring of caring and support from around the world. Focus on the aid being provided by governments, nonprofit aid agencies, and individual donors. Discuss the truly Herculean logistical process of getting aid to the most impacted areas of Haiti and the cooperation between leaders and people of so many nations. Discuss how President Obama is working with former Presidents Clinton and Bush to raise money to help the Haitian people.

Spend family time. Being with family is always important in difficult or sad times. Even if your children are not significantly impacted by this tragedy, this may be a good opportunity to participate in and to appreciate family life. Doing things together reinforces children's sense of stability and connectedness. Consider reaching out to your faith community, if this is a part of your family's life.

Do something positive with your children to help others in need. Taking action is one of the most powerful ways to help children feel more in control and to build a stronger sense of connection. Suggestions include making individual donations to international disaster relief organizations, holding a school or community fundraiser, or even working to support families in need within the community.

What not to say or do. Refrain from giving any kind of religious explanation for the disaster, but instead offer support. Be especially careful not to blame Haitians or say that Haitians are cursed. Do not blame the tragedy on voodoo or say that they historically made a pact with the devil. These are the worst things to say. Make sure that young children are not engaged in discussions or testimonies about what happened in Haiti. When adults discuss the horrific details of the earthquake, it is advisable to move children out of the room. Children, particularly those who are vulnerable, should be offered alternative settings or activities when discussions occur.

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUTH IMPACTED BY THE EARTHQUAKE

Children and adolescents who have lost a loved one or are connected to devastated communities may need extra care. Many families are struggling with anxiety, frustration, and fear over the fate of their loved ones in Haiti. Adults are desperately trying to learn if family members are alive and grieving for those who are not. Attempts to get news about and/or get help to survivors are causing tremendous stress. In some cases, family members here may be traveling to Haiti to help relatives in need or perhaps to bring orphaned children back to the United States. It is important that the needs of children here are not overlooked. (For detailed information about helping children cope with loss and grief, see *Helping Children Cope With Death, Loss and Grief*.)

Know the risk factors for severe emotional reactions. The degree to which children are affected will vary depending on personal circumstances. Most vulnerable are children who:

- Had family members killed, injured, or missing in Haiti
- Originally come from or have family still living in devastated communities
- Have a strong sense of religious or cultural identity with the Haitian people
- Have friends, teachers, or neighbors who lost loved ones in the earthquake
- Are survivors of other natural disasters, particularly in potentially vulnerable areas
- Have recently lost a loved one, particularly a parent
- Suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, or other mental health disorder

Know potential child/adolescent reactions to trauma and loss. Some children may be at risk for serious emotional reactions because of personal circumstances. Symptoms may differ depending on age. Depression, anxiety, sadness, and anger can be common reactions. Contact a professional if your child exhibits significant changes in behavior or any of the following symptoms over an extended period of time.

- **Preschoolers**—thumb sucking, bedwetting, clinging to parents, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, fear of the dark, regression in behavior, withdrawal from friends and routines
- **Elementary School Children**—irritability, aggressiveness, clinginess, nightmares, school avoidance, poor concentration, withdrawal from activities and friends
- **Adolescents**—sleeping and eating disturbances, agitation, increase in conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behavior, and poor concentration

Ask for help if you or your children need it. This tragedy can feel overwhelming for families directly affected, particularly those who have lost loved ones. Staying connected to your community can be extremely helpful. It may also be important to seek additional support from a mental health professional to cope with overwhelming feelings. This is normal in the aftermath of a traumatic event, particularly of this scale. Seeking psychological help should not be interpreted that you or your child are mentally ill. If your child is hurting physically and has a broken arm, you would access medical aid. Similarly, if your child is hurting emotionally, it is normal to seek psychological aid. As a parent or caregiver, you do not have to handle everything alone.

Communicate with your school. Children grieving for loved ones, anxious about family members who are injured or unaccounted for, or concerned about the future of family members whose communities were destroyed are under a great deal of stress. This level of distress may be very disruptive and result in inattention in class, poorer grades, changes in behavior, or school absences. The situation may also take a good deal of time to resolve. Teachers should determine what extra support or leniency students need and work with parents to develop a plan to help students keep up with their work. Your school psychologist, social worker, or counselor can also provide extra support.

Understand the grief process. Grieving is a process, not an event. Everyone grieves differently, and not all children within a developmental age group understand death in the same way or with the same feelings. Children's views of death are shaped by their unique perspective of the world and experiences. Expressions of grief include emotional shock, sorrow, withdrawal, regressive behavior, anger or acting out, and disbelief/denial. (See *Helping Children Cope with Death, Loss and Grief*.) Students should be given the opportunity to express their grief through playacting or arts and crafts (for younger children) and through art, drama, music, and writing (for older elementary children, adolescents, and youth).

Be willing to discuss the concept of death. Children may be concerned about dying or a loved one dying, particularly because large numbers of children are among the dead. Talking with fearful children and adolescents about this very sensitive topic is important. Outside resources can be very helpful (e.g., books geared to different ages that explore death and dying; grief and hospice organizations; or a faith community, if part of your family life). If a child comes from a home with a resilient belief system or faith, it will likely provide a powerful source of support when it comes to dealing with these issues.

Be aware of your own needs. Don't ignore your own feelings of anxiety, grief, and anger. Talking to friends, family members, religious leaders, and mental health counselors can help. It is important to let your children know that you are sad. Understand that if you lost family or friends, just getting through the day can be overwhelming. You will be better able to support your children if you can express your own emotions in a productive manner. Get appropriate sleep, nutrition, and exercise.

HAITI: FACTS AND CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS

Haiti is a nation of 9 million people and is both the second oldest democracy and the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. Approximately 80% of Haiti's population lives in poverty, subsisting on less than \$2 a day. The population speaks Haitian-Creole and the literacy rate within the country has been estimated to be about 55%. Haiti was struck in 2005 and 2008 by multiple hurricanes which displaced hundreds of thousands of people. Even before the earthquake, less than half the people had access to clean drinking water, and malnutrition was prevalent. In addition, natural disasters typically have the greatest impact on those with the least financial resources. They have fewer resources to prevent the problems from occurring (that is, to build hurricane- or earthquake-resistant buildings) or to deal with tragedy after it has occurred. Current estimates place the death toll at 200,000, with 250,000 injured and 3 million people likely to need international aid for the foreseeable future.

The people of Haiti and those of Haitian descent living within the United States are proud, resilient, and hard working. Typically, Haitians are a reserved people; they may appear not to express emotion during the crisis, even if they have suffered a great loss. As in many cultures, males tend to keep their feelings to themselves, whereas females may express themselves more. Generally, Haitians will not speak unless prompted. Also, Haitians will not necessarily seek out support but will accept it if offered. Also, in some parts of the Haitian community, there is a stigma associated with seeking psychological help. In a crisis it is not unusual for children's emotional needs to be neglected because of the necessity of adults to take care of other competing and more pressing concerns.

Challenges for Families in the United States

It is likely that every Haitian American has been directly affected to some degree by this disaster. Children and adolescents within this community will likely be dealing with a range of issues, including:

- the inability to communicate with loved ones and the corresponding inability to determine the status of friends and families
- worry and anxiety for survivors who are coping with horrific conditions (including loved ones)
- grief for loved ones who have died
- distress over identifying loved one's bodies and obtaining proper burials that provide a sense of dignity and the inability to establish a sense closure with their loved ones who have died
- a deep sense of despair over the total devastation of a home town
- for those have not traveled back to Haiti, a profound sense of loss over ever connecting to their homeland and culture
- concern about the potential for violence and significant disease and widespread health problems
- extreme frustration over not being able to do more to help
- an intense urgency to do something proactive
- parents who are immersed in their emotional reactions and attempts to cope and/or locate and help loved ones
- a strengthening or crisis of faith as they try to understand the tragedy
- a deepening sense of community and pride in being Haitian

As members of the National Association of School Psychologists, our hearts go out to the brave and resilient people of Haiti and the Haitian American people living within our country. We wish you strength in your time of greatest need.

All handouts referenced above can be accessed at

http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/haiti.aspx. Also listed on the site are links to other organizations with information about helping children and families cope with crises and means to donate to international relief agencies online.

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