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Helping All Students Cope With the Haitian Earthquake: Guidance for School Administrators

The scale of the physical devastation and the loss of life caused by the recent earthquake in Haiti can be expected to have a range of emotional effects on children here in the United States. Most children, like most adults, will struggle to comprehend the magnitude of the tragedy but will cope well. However, exposure to the horror of the earthquake and its aftermath, provided by graphic media reports, can increase the emotional impact of these events, *even for children and youth not directly connected to the events*. Children are particularly vulnerable.

Additionally, many schools throughout the country will be supporting students who are directly linked to the disaster because they have loved ones in Haiti who are missing, injured, dead, or struggling to survive. Most are Haitian Americans, but there were also thousands of non-Haitian Americans in Haiti at the time of the earthquake, many of whom have family here. The following information provides an overview for administrators who can work with other school personnel and parents to help all students cope with the earthquake by being aware of risk factors, common crisis reactions, and coping strategies.

RISK FACTORS

With support from parents and teachers, most students will successfully cope with this tragedy and not suffer significant emotional consequences. However, some may be at risk for more extreme reactions. The severity of these reactions will increase with the presence of the following factors:

- **Personal Circumstances**—lost loved ones in Haiti
- **History**—previously exposed to natural disasters (especially earthquakes), has already experienced significant loss, and/or is currently coping with other critical incidents
- **Media Exposure**—witnessed excessive exposure to graphic media earthquake reports
- **Family Support**—limited family support and/or ongoing parental distress
- **Mental Health**—a preexisting mental disorder, particularly an anxiety disorder
- **Coping Style**—the use of blame and anger or avoidance as a way of coping with stress

CRISIS REACTIONS

Students will differ in their crisis reactions depending on developmental level but generally all show a change in typical behavior. These reactions may signal the need for additional support:

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

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH THE HAITIAN EARTHQUAKE

Haiti and Cultural Implications

Haiti, a nation of 9 million people, is both the oldest democracy and the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, with approximately 80% of its population living in poverty and 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%. Even before the earthquake, less than half the people had access to clean drinking water, and malnutrition was prevalent. Current estimates place the death toll near 200,000, with 3 million people likely to need international aid for the foreseeable future. These numbers will continue to change over the coming weeks.

The people of Haiti and those of Haitian descent living with 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 (although the personal and spiritual grieving process can be very emotional). Generally, Haitians will not speak unless prompted. In addition, Haitians will not necessarily seek out support but will accept it if offered. Students who are not part of the Haitian American community but who have family members or other loved ones in Haiti may also be dealing with many of the same issues mentioned above, in addition to experiencing a sense of isolation in their distress or grief because they are not part of a larger community experiencing a similar situation.

Challenges for Affected Students in the United States

It is likely that every Haitian American has been directly affected to some degree by this disaster. Students 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
- 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 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

About Earthquakes

Although most students being supported here in the United States will not have experienced the earthquake directly, some will have family members who did, and many will have seen images on television. As a school administrator, it is helpful to understand the unique nature of earthquakes. Aftershocks differentiate earthquakes from other natural disasters. Since there is no clearly defined endpoint, the disruptions caused by continued tremors and devastated infrastructure may increase psychological distress. Unlike other natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes and certain types of floods), earthquakes occur with virtually no warning. Providing students in the United States, who now appear anxious about earthquakes, with factual information about the risk they face from such a natural disaster may be indicated. To the extent these students live in earthquake prone areas, providing them with adaptive responses to this type of natural disaster has been suggested to reduce these negative feelings (as well as promoting adaptive behaviors if and when such students are confronted with the reality of an earthquake). Guidance regarding such adaptive behavior can be found on the U.S. Geological Survey website <http://earthquake.usgs.gov/prepare/>

10 TIPS FOR SUPPORTING STUDENTS

Determine who within the school community is personally impacted. Some students are personally impacted by the earthquake because they have loved ones in Haiti who are missing, injured, dead, or struggling to survive. These students have unique needs for support that are different from those not personally impacted. Teachers, support staff, administrators, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, maintenance personnel, secretaries, and others may also be impacted. For specific information on how to help, see *Helping Students Cope With the Haitian Earthquake: Guidance for School Mental Health Professionals*.

Determine the needs of families. Whole families may be impacted by the crisis, and parents may have difficulty focusing on or meeting the needs of their children. Recognizing family stressors and helping to provide or to identify family support is important to helping the children cope. Maintain an accurate and evolving list of current community resources available to help impacted families.

Make mental health services available. Depression, anxiety, and stress are natural reactions to crisis and loss. These symptoms can emerge over time. For many immigrant families, school is the only place where they have access to mental health services. Work with the crisis team to assess students' ongoing mental health needs. Services can include group and individual counseling, referrals to community services, and a process for keeping track of students at risk. To be most effective, services must be culturally appropriate.

Maintain as much continuity and normalcy as possible. Allowing students to deal with their reactions is important but so is providing a sense of normalcy. Routine classes, after-school activities, and friends can help students feel more secure and better able to function. Teachers should determine what extra support or leniency students need and work with school mental health staff and parents to develop a plan to help students keep up with their work.

Talk to your students. Take the time to discuss events factually. Use a map or globe and provide relevant information about seismology, geography, cultural issues, and emergency and public health services. Even students who do not know anyone who has been hurt may experience a sense of loss or grief, feel at risk themselves, or be concerned that such major disasters can happen with little to no warning. Be a good listener and observer. Let them know that others share their feelings and that their reactions are common. Be honest about your own feelings and reactions.

Monitor the news. It is important to stay informed, but exposure to endless news may not be helpful. Images of the disaster itself and the resulting human suffering from injury, hunger, and disease can become overwhelming. Young students in particular may not be able to distinguish between images on TV and their personal reality. Older students may choose to watch the news, but be available to discuss what they see and to help put it into perspective.

Make a concerted effort not to stereotype students or cultural groups in a negative way. Emphasize that the Haitian people are not to be blamed for the devastation that occurred. Emphasize the ingenuity, creativity, and resiliency of the citizens of Haiti. Refrain from giving any kind of religious explanation for the disaster; instead offer support. Desperate behavior, including violence, is common when people are placed in dire circumstances for any length of time after a disaster and fear there is no sense of hope for rescue or recovery.

Highlight people's compassion and humanity. The Haitian earthquake has generated a tremendous outpouring of caring and support from around the world. Focus on the aid being provided by governments, non-profit aid agencies, and individual donors. Discuss the enormous logistical process of getting aid to the most impacted areas and the cooperation between people of so many nations.

Do something positive with students to help others in need. Taking action is one of the most powerful ways to help students 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.

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

For additional resources visit http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/haiti.aspx.

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