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The Tragedy in Haiti: Helping Children Cope Tips for Educators

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. Many schools will be supporting students affected by the disaster because they have loved ones in Haiti who are missing, injured, dead, or struggling to survive. Children orphaned by the earthquake in Haiti will be coming to the United States to live and to enroll in our public schools. Children in our country that are not connected to Haiti may also 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. School personnel can help children by supporting their emotional and psychological needs, helping them understand the events factually, providing them with the opportunity to talk about their feelings, and maintaining a sense of normalcy, safety and security.

BACKGROUND

A Brief History of the Earthquake in Haiti

Haiti, the second oldest democracy in the Western hemisphere, suffered a tragedy of devastating proportions when at 4:53 p.m. on January 12, an earthquake measuring 7.0 on the Richter scale rocked the foundation of the country, pancaked buildings, and left tens of thousands dead and injured, as well as hundreds of thousands homeless. In the aftermath, hotels, hospitals, schools, prisons, as well as the National Palace, the main cathedral, and many government offices had all been wrecked.

On television, children and families watched with horror and shock as they witnessed people screaming and crying, trying to find disaster victims, carrying bloody bodies, and looking for someone to help. Pictures of collapsed buildings, people caught under the rubble, and corpses lining the street appeared repeatedly.

In the United States, anxiety and dread filled households, as families who had friends and relatives in Haiti tried to reach them or their neighbors by phone. In most instances, they were unable to get through. When they did, many learned not only of the death of one relative or friend, but sometimes of an entire family. At this time, many do not know the fate of their friends or relatives, and the anxiety can be overwhelming. People have been buried in mass graves and others have been cremated without, in many instances, identifying the bodies. Many will never know the fate of their loved ones.

In Haiti there are serious concerns that major public health problems will occur within the coming weeks. Drinkable water is the first priority. With the water distribution system in disarray, there is the possibility that the water supplies could easily become contaminated, which would then lead to diseases such as dysentery and cholera.

Presently, the banking structure in Haiti has been severely impacted and people living within the United States who have been trying to get money into Haiti have not been able to do so. This creates even more anxiety as people who want to help their friends and relatives are not able to do so. Moreover, many people living in Haiti depend on outside financial support to live.

Haiti and Cultural Implications

Haiti is a nation of 9 million people 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 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 within the United States are proud, resilient, and hard working. Typically, Haitians can be a reserved people, especially with strangers; they may appear not to express emotion during the crisis, even if they have suffered a great loss (although the personal grieving process can be quite emotional). As in many cultures, males tend to keep their feelings to themselves, whereas females may express themselves more. In some instances, women may erupt in uncontrollable crying when dealing with the death of a loved one and this should not be seen as unusual. Generally, Haitians will not speak unless prompted. Also Haitians will not necessarily seek out support but will accept it if offered. 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.

Coping

The magnitude of the physical devastation and the loss of life in the Haitian disaster are disturbing even for those not directly affected by the event. Like adults, many children and youth try to comprehend the scope of such tragedy through their perceptions of how it relates to them. Common reactions include sadness, concern over a large-scale disaster occurring at home, and the strong desire to help.

Although most children in our country are resilient and will recover over time, some may need additional support because of their personal circumstances. This is particularly true for those who have lost loved ones in Haiti or have recently personally experienced a natural disaster. Extended family is extremely important for the Haitian people and many immigrants have strong ties to family back home. Adults can help children by supporting their emotional and psychological needs, helping them understand the events factually, and providing them with the opportunity to talk about their experiences and feelings.

Whenever a tragedy occurs, children, like many grownups, may be confused or frightened. Most likely they will look to adults for information and guidance on how to react. Parents, guardians, and school personnel can help children cope first and foremost by establishing a solid sense of safety and security.

Challenges for Affected Students in the United States

Educators need to understand that 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 injured loved ones)
- grief for loved ones who have died

- distress over identifying loved one's bodies and the inability to obtain proper burials that provide a sense of dignity
- concern over continuity of the lineage, that is, no future generations to carry on the family or the family name
- no opportunity to establish a sense of closure with their loved ones who have died
- a deep sense of despair over the total devastation of a home town
- for those who had never 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 own emotional reactions and attempts to cope, and/or locate and help loved ones
- temporary absence of a parent who has gone to Haiti to look for missing relatives
- a strengthening or crisis of faith as they try to understand the tragedy
- a deepening sense of community and pride in being Haitian

Dealing with so many issues and stressors will significantly impact a student's attention, concentration, and ability to learn. Consequently, it may be necessary for teachers to make adjustments and provide academic supports to help get the student through the academic year.

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.

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING ALL CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Talk to your students. Let children guide you to learn how concerned they are or how much information they need. If appropriate (that is, if the class has questions and needs to talk about the earthquake and the relief efforts), take the time in class to discuss events factually. Use a map or globe and provide relevant information about earthquakes, seismology, geography, cultural issues, and emergency and public health services. Allow children and teens to discuss their feelings and concerns and encourage questions. Even children who do not know anyone personally impacted may experience a sense of loss or grief, may feel at risk, or may be concerned that such a major disaster can happen with little to no warning. Acknowledge and normalize their feelings. Being a caring listener is important. Let them know that others share their feelings and that their reactions are common and expected. Be aware that in U.S. classrooms, there may be children severely impacted who lost friends and members of their family; whereas there will be others relatively unaffected. Expect a wide range of responses depending on the personal impact. Some youngsters will barely be able to function and others will go on as if the tragedy in Haiti did not impact them at all. People grieve differently and individually. There is no one typical or best way that individuals grieve.

Be honest. Acknowledge your feelings about the event. Be sure your comments are age-appropriate, but even young children will feel more reassured and closer to you if you are open and honest. For older children in particular, it is okay to admit that you feel sad, perhaps a little helpless that you cannot do more to make a difference, or are even overwhelmed by the destructive power of nature. You should not be expected to have all the answers. If you do not know an answer or do not know how to respond to a question, just say so. Balance statements of concern with information about the international response to the tragedy.

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.

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.

Do something positive with your students 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.

Recognize anxiety about the risk of a natural disaster. Younger children may be concerned that they will 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.

Identify vulnerable populations. 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

Determine who within the school community lost family and friends as a result of the earthquake. This may include students but will also encompass teachers, support staff, administrators, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, maintenance personnel, secretaries, and others. Make an effort to be supportive of those who are grieving.

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 educators need to 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.

What not to say or do. Refrain from giving any kind of religious explanation for the disaster; instead offer support. Be especially careful not to blame Haitians or say that Haitians are cursed. Do not blame the tragedy on Vodou or say that they historically made a pact with the devil. These are the worst things to say.

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS PERSONALLY IMPACTED

Children and teens who have lost a loved one or are connected to devastated communities may need extra care. The following information can help teachers support the needs of these children. For detailed information about helping children cope with loss and grief, see *Helping Children Cope With Death, Loss and Grief*.

Be a good listener and observer. If students 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?"

Know potential child/adolescent reactions to trauma. Most children will be able to cope with their concerns over current events with the help of parents and other caring adults. However, some children may be at risk of more extreme reactions because of personal circumstances. Symptoms may differ depending on age. Adults should contact a professional if children exhibit 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

Recognize potential grief, anxiety, and stress. Impacted students may be 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. In some cases, family members here may be traveling to Haiti to help relatives in need or perhaps to bring orphaned children from the family back to the United States. 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. Compassion and patience for the educational performance of the children affected by this tragedy is strongly recommended.

Provide students the opportunity to express their feelings. This could include participating in general class discussions and activities, but doing so may not be appropriate for everyone. Students should also have the opportunity to meet in small groups or individually with the school psychologist, school social worker, or school counselor. It may be a good time to have students write a poem or a song, draw a picture, or create a story to express their feelings.

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.

Enable students to take action. Even more than students not directly impacted, children who have suffered a loss may feel compelled to do something to make a difference. Their focus is likely to be on family as well as the larger affected community. They can help organize fundraisers within the school or at least work with classmates who are, provide information to classmates about specific community needs, write articles for the school newspaper, and more. Doing something positive and knowing that their classmates want to help as well can strengthen a student's sense of hope and belonging. Consider

making sympathy cards or sending letters to the families and survivors of the tragedy, or writing thank you letters to doctors, nurses, and other healthcare professionals as well as emergency rescue workers, firefighters, police, and the military.

Respect cultural issues and boundaries regarding crisis and death. Many Haitian American families are part of a close-knit, faith-based community. Determine what support system students have access to and what are appropriate forms of support they can receive from school personnel or members of the broader community. Schools may be able to help link isolated students or families to relevant cultural support systems. (See *Cultural Issues in Death* and *Culturally Competent Crisis Response: Information for School Psychologists and Crisis Teams*.)

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. When violence erupts in Haiti, this should be seen as the result of desperate people trying their best to get their essential needs for food, water, shelter, medical care, safety, and security met.

Make culturally appropriate mental health services available. Depression, anxiety, and stress are natural reactions to crisis and loss. Many students will be fine with the support of their families and community, but others will need more specific mental health support. For many Haitian American families, school is the only place where they have access to mental health services. Teachers should talk to their school psychologists, who can provide consultation or help arrange for appropriate counseling. Teachers should listen to or refer students who seem to be struggling emotionally. The school psychologist should also be able to make referrals to community mental health resources as necessary. It is important to know what resources are available for students and families. Be aware that many practitioners may be willing to donate services following a tragedy of this magnitude. Genuine concern by a teacher can make an appreciable difference in a child's life.

Maintain an accurate and evolving list of current community resources available to help impacted families. It is imperative to compile a list of community resources. This should include the name, telephone number, website (if available), contact person (if appropriate), description of services, and fees if charged. Try to determine if support groups are being provided at local churches or community agencies.

Be willing to discuss the concept of death. Children may be more 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 a part of 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.

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).

Help children and adolescents support their classmates and friends. Seeing a classmate or friend coping with a loss may scare or upset children or youth who have had little or no experience with death and grieving. Young children may need help understanding the concept of death and why their friend is sad. Children of any age may need help to communicate condolences or comforting messages.

Help them decide what to say and reassure them that simple expressions of sympathy and offers of support are fine. Help children anticipate some changes in friends' behavior. It is important that they understand that their grieving friends may act differently, may withdraw from their friends for a while, may seem angry or very sad, but that this does not mean a lasting change in their relationship. Encourage them to invite their classmate or friend to do "regular" activities like going to the movies or playing sports. Spending time with friends may offer a much needed distraction and sense of normalcy. If you have students impacted by the tragedy in Haiti, use this as an opportunity to make your classroom a caring community.

Encourage children who are worried about a classmate or friend to talk to a caring adult. This can help alleviate their own concern or potential sense of responsibility for making their friend feel better. Children may also share important information about a friend who is at risk of more serious grief reactions. Additionally, for children who have experienced their own loss (previous death of a parent, grandparent, sibling), observing the grief of a friend can bring back painful memories. These children also are at greater risk for developing more serious stress reactions and should be given extra support as needed.

Gauge your own stress level. 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 students know that you are sad. Understand that if you are a teacher who lost family or friends, just getting through the day can be overwhelming. You will be better able to support your students if you can express your own emotions in a productive manner. Get appropriate sleep, nutrition, and exercise.

Spend family time. Being an educator is a challenging job even in the best of times. If you are trying to support your students who suffered tragedy and are dealing with pain, it is even harder. Being with family is always important in difficult or sad times. Even if your students 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 a family's sense of stability and connectedness.

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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