



NATIONAL
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PSYCHOLOGISTS

Helping Children in the Event of a Tsunami: Information for Parents and Teachers

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) is committed to providing information to help children in the event of a crisis. This includes materials related to preventing and preparing for a crisis as well as responding to and helping children cope in the aftermath of an event. The scale of the tsunami disaster in Southeast Asia has made clear the potentially devastating force of this type of natural disaster, particularly if communities are unprepared. Although the likelihood of a similar event of that scope occurring in the United States is not great, coastal and island communities are vulnerable to tsunamis and being prepared is important. The following information can help adults understand what to expect, how to prepare, and how best to help the children in their care should their communities be impacted. It should be noted that many of the suggestions noted here are applicable to other types of natural disasters. For information on how to help children impacted by or reacting to current events in Southeast Asia, see Effects of the Indian Ocean Tsunami: Helping Children Cope at <http://www.nasponline.org/NEAT/crisismain.html>.

Experiencing the tremendous destructive power of a tsunami (or tidal wave) can be frightening even for adults, and the devastation to the familiar environment (i.e., home and community) can be long lasting and distressing. Tsunamis present a variety of unique issues and coping challenges, including: the need to relocate when home and/or community have been destroyed, the possibility of fatalities, the role of the family in lessening or exacerbating the trauma, and emotional reactions.

Children look to the significant adults in their lives for guidance on how to manage their reactions both during and after a crisis event.. Parents, teachers, and other caregivers can help young people cope with a natural disaster like a tsunamis by being prepared (i.e., knowing what to do when faced with a tsunami); remaining calm; and once the danger has passed, reassuring children that they will be all right. Addressing the emotional needs of children and youth should emphasize teaching effective coping strategies (including how to survive a tsunami), fostering supportive relationships, and helping children understand their reactions. Giving children a sense that recovery is possible and that there are effective protective responses to a tsunami can increase feelings of controllability and lessen the psychological trauma generated by these natural disasters. Returning children to familiar routines and rituals as soon as possible will also lessen the psychological impact of this type of disaster.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH TSUNAMIS

Tsunamis are a series of waves or “wave trains,” usually caused by earthquakes. Tsunami waves can reach heights of 30+ feet as they come on shore and, in low-lying areas, can flow miles inland. They travel with tremendous force and speeds up to 500 miles per hour. Depending upon the location of the earthquake, there may be some official warning before this type of natural disaster strikes. However, the amount of warning will vary from a few minutes to many hours. For example, following a 9.5 earthquake in Chile on May 22, 1960, the resulting tsunami took 15 hours to reach Hawaii and 22

hours to reach Japan (Atwater et al., 1999), as opposed to the virtual lack of warning that occurred with the recent Indian Ocean tsunami. Warning signs include the original earthquake, indicators from underwater seismology tracking devices when present, a loud rumbling noise, and/or a rapid fall or rise in coastal waters. As with other types of disasters, the more warning people have to evacuate the lower the loss of life.

Reactions immediately following a tsunami may include emotional and physical exhaustion. In some instances children may experience survivor guilt (e.g., that their home was left unharmed, while others' were completely destroyed). In general it might be expected that symptoms will be more extreme in children who had more frightening experiences during the tsunami (i.e., having to run from the wave itself, being caught up in the water, witnessing physical destruction) and with greater levels of damage to their community and homes.

The sights, sounds, and smells of a tsunami often generate fear and anxiety. Consequently, similar sensations (e.g., the smell of water soaked homes, earthquake aftershocks) may generate distress among children in the months that follow. Given the scale of most tsunamis, individuals living outside the ravages of the waves may still feel exposed to the danger from precautionary evacuation, contact with tsunami survivors, and television reports. Some children may also react to follow-up news coverage, and even reports that talk about earthquakes and flooding conditions in other parts of the world. It is important to acknowledge that although a tsunami will last for a relatively short period of time, survivors can be involved with the aftermath of these waves for months or even years. In attempts to reconstruct their lives, families are often required to deal with multiple people and agencies (e.g., disaster relief workers, the Red Cross, etc).

PREPARING FOR A TSUNAMI

Know the emergency warning and response system in your community. Most coastal areas in the U.S. vulnerable to tsunamis have response systems for natural disasters, including a tsunami warning system in the Pacific Ocean. It can be helpful to review these systems and compare similarities *and differences* in response to other types of disaster, (e.g., earthquakes). Because schools today are often a focal point for disaster response and recovery, schools may want to hold a parent meeting or send home information regarding their school disaster plan.

Have a family plan. This should involve having a place to go in the event you to evacuate, a way to get in touch with each other, friends or neighbors who can help, emergency supplies, etc. This is important not only in case something does happen but it also will help you feel more in control now. Events that are judged to be "out of control" are especially frightening. Anything children can do to control their situation will be helpful. Most older children can participate in this process and will probably feel better if they do. However, assess your younger children's understanding of the situation. Do not involve them in this planning if you think doing so will **only** serve to heighten their awareness of the danger.

Review survival strategies. Depending on their age, teaching children how to survive a tsunami can lessen fears of future events. Many organizations, such as the American Red Cross and Federal Emergency Management Agency have useful information. Specific recommendations offered by the U.S. Geological Survey (Atwater et al., 1999) for surviving a tsunami include the following:

- *Heed natural warnings.* An earth quake may serve as a warning that a tsunami is coming, and so may a rapid fall or rise in costal waters.
- *Heed official warnings.* Play it safe, even if warnings seem ambiguous or you think the danger has passed.
- *Expect many waves.* The next wave may be bigger, and the tsunami may last for hours.
- *Head for high ground and stay there.* Move uphill or at least inland, away form the coast.
- *Abandon belongings.* Save your life, not your possessions.
- *Don't count on the roads.* When fleeing a tsunami caused by a nearby earthquake, you may find roads broken or blocked.
- *Go to an upper floor or roof of a building.* Only if trapped and unable to reach high ground, go to an upper story of a sturdy building or get on its roof.
- *Climb a tree.* As a last resort, climb up a strong tree if trapped on low ground.
- *Climb onto something that floats.* If swept up by a tsunami, look for something to use as a raft.
- *Expect the waves to leave debris.* A tsunami will leave behind sand, the remains of houses, and bodies.
- *Expect quakes to lower coastal land.* A large earthquake can leave nearby coastal areas lowered, allowing tidal water to flood them.
- *Expect company.* Shelter your neighbors.

POSSIBLE REACTIONS OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH TO NATURAL DISASTERS

Most children will be able to cope over time with the help of parents and other caring adults. However, some children may be at risk of more extreme reactions. The severity of children's reactions will depend on their specific risk factors. These include exposure to the tsunami, personal injury or loss of a loved one, relocation from their home or community, level of parental support, the level of physical destruction, and pre-existing risks, such as a previous traumatic experience or mental illness. Symptoms may differ depending on age but can include:

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

A small group of children may be at risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Symptoms can include those listed above, exhibited over an extended period of time. Other symptoms may include re-experiencing the tsunami during play and/or dreams; anticipating or feeling that a tsunami is happening again; avoiding reminders of the tsunami; general numbness to emotional topics; and increased arousal symptoms such as inability to concentrate and startle reactions. Although extremely rare, some adolescents may also be at increased risk of suicide if they suffer from serious mental health problems like PTSD or depression. Students who exhibit these symptoms should be referred for appropriate mental health evaluation and intervention as soon as possible.

IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING A TSUNAMI: INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS AND PARENTS

Remain calm and reassuring. Children take their cues from adults, especially young children. Acknowledge the loss or destruction, but emphasize the community's efforts to clean up and rebuild. To the extent it is possible to do so, assure them that family and friends will take care of them and that life will return to normal.

Acknowledge and normalize their feelings. Allow children to discuss their feelings and concerns, and address any questions they may have regarding the tsunami. Listen and empathize. A caring listener is very important. Let them know that their reactions are common and expected for this situation.

Encourage children to talk about tsunami-related events. Children need an opportunity to discuss their experiences in a safe, accepting environment. Provide activities that enable children to discuss their experiences. This may include a range of methods (both verbal and nonverbal) and incorporate varying projects (e.g., drawing, stories, audio and video recording). Seek the help of your local school psychologist, counselor, or social worker if you need help with ideas or managing the conversation.

Promote positive coping and problem-solving skills. Activities should teach children how to identify issues and apply problem-solving skills to tsunami-related stressors. Encourage children to develop realistic and positive methods of coping that increase their ability to manage their anxiety and to identify which strategies fit with each situation.

Emphasize children's resiliency. Focus on their competencies. Help children identify what they have done in the past that helped them cope when they were frightened or upset. Bring their attention to other communities that have experienced natural disasters and recovered. On supportive adult can do a great deal to increase a child's resiliency.

Strengthen children's friendship and peer support. Children with strong emotional support from others are better able to cope with adversity. Children's relationships with peers can help decrease isolation. In most crisis situations, friendships may be disrupted because of family relocations. In some cases, parents may be less available to provide support to their children because of their own distress and feelings of being overwhelmed. Activities such as asking children to work cooperatively in small groups can help children strengthen supportive relationships with their peers.

Take care of your own needs. Take time for yourself and try to deal with your own reactions to the situation as fully as possible. You will be better able to help your children if you are coping well. If you are anxious or upset, your children are more likely to feel the same way. Talk to other adults such as family, friends, faith leaders, or counselors. It is important not to dwell on your fears or anxiety by yourself. Sharing feelings with others often makes people feel more connected and secure. Take care of your physical health. Make time, however small, to do things you enjoy. **Avoid using drugs or alcohol to feel better.**

FOLLOWING A TSUNAMI: SPECIFIC INFORMATION FOR SCHOOLS

Return to "school" as soon as possible. A tsunami may result in the temporary or even extended closure of a school. However, return to normal routines will help reassure students that disaster recovery is possible and in doing so decrease the tsunami's potential to cause psychological trauma. Schools can play a critical role in this process. Recognizing the possibility that the tsunami may have

damaged school sites to an extent that an immediate return to a specific school is not possible, locating temporary alternative school sites may be necessary. Simply reconnecting children with their peers and teachers can be a powerful crisis intervention.

Allow time for staff to discuss their feelings and share their experiences. Upon return to school, it is important to allow time for a group discussion (in a safe and caring context) for staff to discuss their feelings and share their experiences. It is essential that teachers and staff be given permission to take care of themselves in order to ensure that they will be able to help their students. Handouts regarding possible trauma reactions among children and other relevant information can be valuable resources for caring adults (e.g., additional handouts are available at <http://www.nasponline.org/NEAT/crisismain.html>). School personnel, (including your school crisis team members) should also have the opportunity to receive support from a trained mental health professional. Providing crisis intervention is emotionally draining and caregivers will need an opportunity to process their crisis response. This could include teachers and other school staff if they have been serving as crisis caregivers for students.

Provide time for students to discuss the tsunami. Depending on the situation, teachers may be able to guide this discussion in class, or students can meet with the school psychologist or other mental health professional for a group crisis intervention. Classroom discussions help children to understand the tsunami. They also encourage students to develop effective means of coping, discover that their classmates share similar questions, and develop peer support networks. **Teachers should not be expected to conduct such discussions if children are severely impacted or if they themselves are distressed.**

Identify children and youth who are high risk and plan interventions. Risk factors are outlined in the above section on children's reactions. Interventions may include classroom discussions, individual counseling, small group counseling, or family therapy. From classroom discussions, and by maintaining close contact with teachers and parents, the school crisis response team can help determine which students need counseling services. A mechanism also needs to be in place for self-referral and parent-referral of students. Be aware of and sensitive to cultural issues regarding response to crisis and loss and tailor interventions appropriately.

Secure additional mental health support. Although many caregivers are often willing to provide support during the immediate aftermath of a natural disaster, long-term services may be lacking. School mental health professionals can help provide and coordinate mental health services, but it is important to connect with community resources as well in order to provide such long-term assistance. Ideally these relationships would be established in advance.

HELPING CHILDREN ADJUST TO RELOCATION AFTER A TSUNAMI

The frequent need to relocate after a tsunami creates unique coping challenges. It may contribute to the social, environmental, and psychological stress experienced by children and their families. Children will be most impacted by the reactions of their parents and other family members, the duration of the relocation, their natural coping style and emotional reactivity, and their ability to stay connected with friends and other familiar people and activities. To the extent possible parents and other caregivers should:

- Provide opportunities for children to see friends and teachers.
- Bring personal items that the child values when staying in temporary housing.

- Establish some daily routines so that the child is able to have a sense of what to expect (including returning to school as soon as possible).
- Provide opportunities for children to share their ideas and listen carefully to their concerns or fears.
- Be sensitive to the disruption that relocation may have and be responsive to the needs of the child.
- Consider the developmental level and unique experiences of each child; it is important to remember that as children vary, so will their responses to the disruption of relocation.

In addition, school personnel should:

- Try to determine the status of every child in the school. Try to make sure that each child absent from school is contacted by school personnel and a record is kept.
- Determine the unique needs of every child whose home might have been destroyed or sustained damage following the tsunami. Help connect these children to supportive resources.
- Find out the phone numbers and addresses of every student who had to relocate. In this way classmates may be able to write notes or make phone calls.
- Help to provide accurate information and address inaccurate rumors or myths.
- Provide opportunities for children to discuss the event and how they are coping in the aftermath. It takes time for children to understand and adjust following a tsunami.
- Understand that it is perfectly normal for children to discuss the event over and over again.
- Use the creative arts (e.g., drama, art, band, chorus, photography) to help children express their emotions.
- Bring agencies into the school that can help families deal with needs related to housing, finances, and insurance. Help children get any necessary medical and emotional assistance.
- Increase staffing for before and after school care. If possible, extend the service for additional hours and even on weekends.
- Utilize the information about the tsunami in related subject areas. Science, math, history, and language arts are especially relevant.
- Use drama, art, music, and photography to help children express their emotions.
- Develop an advisory committee of students to report back to school staff about what resources and changes in routines will help them cope in the aftermath.
- Most of all, listen to all the students. If you listen closely enough they will be able to tell you what they need.

INTERNET RESOURCES

American Red Cross

<http://www.redcross.org>

Federal Emergency Management Agency

<http://www.fema.org/>

Surviving a Tsunami – Lessons from Chile, Hawaii, and Japan

<http://pubs.usgs.gov/circ/c1187/>

Tsunami-hazard information

<http://walrus.wr.usgs.gov/tsunami>

<http://www.pmel.noaa.gov/tsunami>

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<http://walrus.wr.usgs.gov/tsunami>

<http://www.pmel.noaa.gov/tsunami>

Pacific Tsunami Museum

<http://www.tsunami.org/>

USC Tsunami Research Group

<http://cwis.usc.edu/dept/tsunamis/index.html>

The National Tsunami Hazard Mitigation Program (Federal Web Links)

<http://www.pmel.noaa.gov/tsunami-hazard/links.html>

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For further information on helping children cope with crises, visit www.nasponline.org.

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