

## Four Ways to Help Your Child Respond to Frightening Global Events

During catastrophic humanitarian disasters, in our globalized world of media and communications, children are exposed to news, discussion and visual images of the events. Many parents wonder how to respond. Since the coverage and discussion of the events are so widespread, most children older than four or five will be exposed to pieces of information. Parents can provide factual, balanced information, and reassure their children about their personal safety and that the victims of the disaster are getting help.

Depending on the child and their age, talking about major world disasters in the news can help them cope with their emotional reactions, feel safe and even respond with positive actions, at a time when the world seems to be a more dangerous place.

Here are some suggestions to help your child make sense of the earthquake in Haiti and its aftermath, and avoid feelings of anxiety, hopelessness and powerlessness:

### 1. Start a conversation

It is natural for there to be a wide range of responses to the disaster. Some children will be sad, anxious, and even fearful for their own family's safety; others will be confused about how to make sense of the events; and some will have little reaction. The feelings children have will generally be attached to the developmental issues that are most pressing for them. For young children it will usually be issues of separation and safety. For older children it will be issues of fairness and concern for others.

Some children seek reassurance and comfort, whereas others need to talk. Some children may not raise the subject even if it's on their minds; some are afraid of upsetting their parents; while others are too overwhelmed by their feelings to open up a discussion.

As parents we can try to assess how our children are feeling in order to decide whether a discussion is appropriate. If your child doesn't bring the subject up, you can invite conversation by asking a question, for example, "Have you heard anything about a country called Haiti?" If your child clearly isn't interested in talking about it, then don't push.

Let your child's concerns, in their own words, guide the direction and depth of the discussion. Keep your responses brief and simple. Give your child a chance to respond to each of your comments before saying more. Follow the lead of your child's questions, and give no more information than is asked for.

By your ability to listen calmly, you communicate that that your child's feelings are normal, and their fears not too frightening to deal with. Acknowledge that their feelings are okay, saying things like, "I know this is upsetting for you", "I know this is scary", "You are safe here at home and at school", "Let's talk about what we can do to feel better." A comment such as, "You seem sad when we talk about this. I feel sad too," tells a child that their feelings are not only normal, but that you have similar feelings as well and are still able to cope.

Answer questions honestly. When children hear rumours and pick up bits of information, giving children the facts is the best way to help them feel safe. Gently correct any misinformation by making factual statements. For example, “Even though you might have seen the pictures on the news over and over again, the earthquake happened only once and now people are getting help”.

If you can't answer your child's questions, use it as an opportunity to explore the answers together. You can show your child that there are orderly ways to go about solving problems and that the world is not beyond our understanding. The web sites of organizations like UNICEF, which has worked in Haiti for decades and is on the ground providing disaster relief, can be good sources of information and positive stories to balance the information from news media.

Thank your child for sharing their thoughts and affirm how much you both care about others and the world around you.

## **2. Help your child to feel personally safe**

Avoid viewing disturbing news coverage in front of your children, especially those under age 10. The news media tend to focus on the most horrific aspects of events, with graphic visual images. Young children in particular may not distinguish between images on screen and their own personal reality – they may believe that they are in imminent danger of an earthquake. Even for older children, limiting exposure to news coverage can protect them from focusing too much on a crisis. If it is appropriate for your child to view media coverage of the events, watch it with your child and talk about it afterward. Use it as an opening for discussion: "How do you feel about what is happening in Haiti?"

Your child will pick up on your own response, so carefully think about how you react to news and information about the disaster. Your child needs to know you are calm and in control.

Try to balance the horrific or frightening information children get from the news media with positive stories, such as the acts of bravery, generosity and kindness of ordinary people caught in the disaster, and the actions of organizations like UNICEF in bringing relief to those affected. Remind your child of the many people who take care of others, e.g. police officers, doctors and nurses, etc.

## **3. Help your child to maintain a sense of control by taking constructive action**

One way to help children deal constructively with their feelings in response to a humanitarian disaster is to give them an opportunity for actions that contribute to relief and recovery. Parents can provide assurance that many people care about the people in Haiti and discuss the ways others are helping. Discuss with your child what they or your family can do to help; making a donation to UNICEF, helping raise funds at school or with a club or team, and telling friends and family how to help.

For older children and adolescents, humanitarian disasters may raise important questions about poverty and development. Parents can help their children gain confidence in their ability to understand what is going on around them, learn to acquire information from a variety of sources, and prevent stereotyping about groups of people by finding out more about global issues, their peers in other countries, and how they can

act as global citizens. UNICEF Canada offers age-appropriate ways to do so at <http://moveyourworld.unicef.ca/>.

#### **4. Respond to changes in behaviour**

For many children, fear and anxiety will come and go, but for some children at a developmental stage when they are trying to come to terms with death and suffering; those who have experienced a recent death or traumatic event or past exposure to a disaster; and those who have family and close friends affected, the anxiety and fear are more constant. Children may show signs of stress through changes in their behaviour. Depending on the child's age, parents may notice the following types of reactions:

- preoccupation with media coverage of the events
- difficulty concentrating
- aggressive behaviour
- physical complaints like stomach aches and headaches
- increase in or loss of appetite
- changes in mood, irritability, anxiety, sadness, withdrawal
- sensitivity to loud noises like sirens or airplanes flying overhead
- sleep disturbances
- reluctance to leave your home, separation problems
- regression in recent developmental accomplishments

If your child is having difficulty coping, it may be appropriate to inform your child's school, and share with the school any strategies which you have used to comfort your child. You can also ask for help – social workers and psychologists are available for consultation at your child's school.

#### **How to explain the events in Haiti:**

Parents can clearly explain the basics of the earthquake and the relief efforts, but may want to wait for follow-up questions from their children before divulging too much information that may frighten or perplex them.

For young children, explain that the ground shook in a town that's very far away, and some of those houses fell down. Now, there are many people helping the families there. Neighbours are helping neighbours, workers are helping take care of people who are hurt, and providing food, water and shelter. People from all over the world are sending help so there will be enough supplies to help everyone. It will take some time, but the help will continue until people have homes to live in and kids can go to school and things are normal again.

For older children, explain that some parts of the world are prone to environmental disasters such as hurricanes, floods or earthquakes. These can cause widespread destruction in poorer areas of the world where there is overcrowding and poverty. Poorer countries like Haiti do not always have some of the protections wealthier countries like Canada have, such as making buildings much more able to withstand earthquakes, or laws to prevent people from living in areas that are dangerous. So there is much less likelihood of such a disaster happening here.

The earthquake in Haiti was so destructive because it took place in a big city, where many poor people live in unsafe buildings. It is true that many people have been injured and lost their homes and friends and relatives. Most people survived, and they are getting help from all over the world. UNICEF is there – UNICEF knows what to do because they have worked in Haiti for more than 60 years. UNICEF is providing clean water, food, medical supplies, shelter, and helping protect children. The people in Haiti will need help in the coming weeks and months to rebuild and recover, and we can help and stay informed on how recovery is happening.