What Happened to OUR World?
Helping Children Cope with Natural Disaster and Catastrophe

For Japan (English language version)

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WHAT HAPPENED TO OUR WORLD?

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On March 11 of 2011, the fifth largest earthquake on record struck Japan, followed by an enormous tsunami. The force of the two together left over twenty-five thousand people dead and countless others injured. Over 150,000 were left without homes, food, or water. The earthquake and tsunami also caused damage to nuclear reactors, triggering concerns about harmful levels of radiation in the environment in the area around the nuclear zone. Millions of people, including children, witnessed this disaster with horror and empathy.

Bright Horizons and Mercy Corps established Comfort for Kids in 2001 to offer assistance to children and families affected by 9/11 in the United States. Since then, the Comfort for Kids program has responded to other disasters in Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. This year, the two organizations are partnering with Peace Winds Japan to offer assistance to children and families affected by the March 12, 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Japan. As parents, educators, employers, relief workers, and caregivers, we want to provide the children around us with the support, reassurance, and understanding they need to promote their resilience during the recovery period and also to help them understand the forces of nature that can disrupt and devastate the world as they know it. What Happened to Our World: Helping Children Cope with Natural Disaster and Catastrophe is intended for all those who work with families and children during times of natural disaster. Together we have an obligation to raise and educate a generation of healthy, vibrant children who live in the world with confidence and wisdom, understand the natural world, and are committed to making the world a better place.

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Introduction

Children’s lives have always been marked by change. Each day brings new revelations that life is filled with storms as well as sunshine. No child ultimately escapes from the experience of fear, loss, grief, and trauma. But extraordinary events that shatter the sense of security of everyone children know and love put a particular pressure on the adults in their lives to be at their best as parents and caregivers.

In March of 2011, a severe earthquake and tsunami on the island of Japan caused massive devastation, loss of life, livelihoods, neighborhoods and trauma for survivors. Earthquakes and tsunamis destroy almost everything in their paths. They not only shake the homes and roadways, they also shake a child’s faith in the safety and comfort of their world.

What Happened to Our World? Helping Children Cope with Natural Disaster and Catastrophe is for parents, teachers, and everyone working to help children and families make sense of a world where the forces of nature can unleash a fury in which buildings are torn apart, lives are lost, and our sense of safety and security can disappear in a flash. It is designed to help adults peer into the minds of children, from infancy through the teenage years, and understand their fears, their grief, and their struggles to understand why — whether through acts of nature or human beings — the ground under their feet can disappear and the world can become a very frightening place. This booklet is to primarily help those who experienced and survived catastrophe firsthand, with some information for children who witnessed from a distance and wondered what it was like or whether they will find themselves in similar circumstances.

Extraordinary events like the earthquake and tsunami in Japan test us all as citizens and human beings sharing a planet. They test us as parents, both as guardians of our children trying to keep them emotionally safe, and as our children’s teachers trying to raise them to become enlightened and empathetic adults. Children learn from what we say and don’t say about the world and their place in it, as well as from our actions. Children grow into the kind of people they will become at least in part by how we guide them through their questions, concerns, and fears, and whether we use the teachable moments thrust upon us to guide and teach the children we care for.

Every day, children everywhere are struggling with life’s darker side. The insights into children’s thinking and behavior, and what they need from the adult world in the aftermath of these events, apply to other calamities, both personal and social: death of loved ones; exposure to violence; the descent into homelessness; or even the sudden loss of a parent due to divorce or separation. Fear, grief, anxiety, and despair have the same disabling force, no matter the cause. The understanding, compassion, and thoughtfulness required by the adults who care for children are much the same. It is easy to support and respect children and parents when they are at their emotional and behavioral best; it’s much harder when circumstances beyond their control may have driven them to their worst.

PART I explores how children respond to natural disaster and other catastrophe, presenting normal reactions to trauma and what children need from their caregivers by age and stage of development.
PART II looks at how children can begin to understand both the world of nature at its most powerful and some difficult aspects of human society that are exposed when disaster erupts. The brief Resources section includes resources for parents and professionals to explore a few of the topics introduced in this book more deeply.
1. Children and Catastrophe

*I came from the weather. The weather was bad.* JARED, AGE 5

Jared, like hundreds of thousands of other children, fled Hurricane Katrina in the United States. Children like Jared left homes, pets, and predictable lives when their world was suddenly washed away. And similarly, 4-year-old Emily, a September 11 survivor, looked out at the World Trade Center rubble and asked “What happened to the world?” Jared, Emily, those affected by the earthquake in Japan and everyone else touched by catastrophe were thinking the same things:

- Will I be OK again?
- Will you be OK?
- Will everyone I love be OK?
- Will the world that I know be OK?

Society-Shaking Events

The earthquake in Japan caused massive devastation. The world watched images of crumbled buildings and families desperately seeking loved ones in the rubble. Entire towns were lost. Relatives or friends tried to make contact or waited anxiously for phone calls or text messages. Survivors feared the effects of aftershocks and hiked miles to get away from the possibility of more devastation. Those outside of Japan watched and wondered “How can I help?”

Life Is Not Fair

Natural disasters and other large-scale tragedies touch many people, but not equally or in the same way. Thousands of children experienced the force and damage of the 2011 Japanese earthquake and tsunami directly. Many more were touched through the lives of people they knew. And since we live in a 24-hour pounding news culture where dramatic images of horror or grief surround us constantly, millions more children around the world watched the television thinking, “That could have been me or my friend or relative or someone I love.” What happened to the world? It has become a place where we need to support each other and our children as events unfold. When a child experiences a world-altering event, we are the ones called on to provide comfort and security and to help them make some sense of what has happened.

Pillars of Security

There is nothing more basic than the need to feel secure: to feel that I am all right, right here, right now. We feel secure when the world is safe, predictable, and manageable. We know we can fit into that
world as ourselves and will be accepted by the people we encounter. We can relax when we are with people we trust, know what to expect, or have confidence that our life experience gives us the skills to cope with whatever will come our way. This is the exact opposite of how we feel in a crisis situation. Young children are perpetual tourists without much life experience, truly strangers in a strange land. They are developing their minds and bodies at such a rate that they are literally new people with each sunrise. Their backlog of life experience is so slight that each day, each new place, each old place brings surprises. Their courage rises and falls like the tides. As we grow up and experience more of the world, good and bad, our life experience gives us more of a base, but we depend on four pillars of security to help us face life’s struggles: **people, place, routine, and tradition.** These four pillars are like the four legs on a table. If one leg is lost, the rest of the table can’t continue to stand up on its own with the same strength:

**People:** For most of us, the most insecure feeling of all is feeling alone — no hand to hold, no one to look up to, and no arms to hold us when we stumble. Security comes from familiar and trusted loved ones who know and understand us, and whom we know and understand. But if those people are just not themselves and behaving unpredictably (as often happens in crisis), or worse, if we lose those closest to us, have no one and are surrounded by strangers, a calming sense of security is hard to come by.

**Place:** In our homes, we can relax. We take comfort in the familiar order, the sounds, sights, and smells. We know our way around and how things work. There are few surprises. Our treasured things are there to reassure us, as are our memories. An unfamiliar place makes demands on our awareness — we need to be alert. In our places, we have the freedom to find or create sanctuaries and places to pause.

**Routine:** Routines are patterns of actions and expectations, the familiar order of the day and the tasks that we do protect us from fear of the unknown. The structuring of time into routines has an enormous impact on how we feel. Routine reassures each of us and stabilizes groups — the regular meal, the prompt dry diaper, the inevitability of sleep. Routines may be challenging to re-establish after a disaster, particularly if children are living in evacuation centers or other temporary housing.

**Tradition:** Tradition holds individuals and groups together in times of stress and uncertainty; it connects people to their cultures and the comfort and familiarity of traditions which is especially important when so much of life has been disrupted. There are traditions that come once a year with holidays or once in a lifetime, such as birth celebrations, weddings and burials. It is important to honor these traditions after disasters, maybe even more important. Some people will not be there to celebrate because they have been displaced or died, but even a few people gathering to honor an old tradition brings comfort and strength.

The four pillars are not equal; certainly people matter the most. But place, routine, and tradition are essential and support the first pillar.

When you are a child or an adult in a crisis, all four pillars — people, place, routine, tradition — may become shaky or crumble, and your world may feel as though it is crashing down upon you — strange
people, strange place, strange routine, and few traditions. By re-establishing the four pillars, you are taking giant steps towards a family’s stability and recovery from the disaster.

**Degrees of Loss and Trauma**

Each of the many survivors of the Japanese earthquake and tsunami has a story that deserves to be heard. Many, perhaps most, were brave and terrified at the same time. But the range of trauma is extraordinarily wide. When disaster strikes, many lives are disrupted and lots of people are affected; some firsthand, others from a distance. Lumping survivors together diminishes all the dimensions of the horror that people experienced and continue to face. Some may lose little but their sense of safety and perhaps their optimism; however, neither of these are small losses. People who had a lot to begin with may have lost a great deal, but still have the human or material resources to start over. Others who had little to begin with had even less after the earthquake. Some people (children included) were true heroes, saving others. Some lost loved ones or were separated from their families for weeks afterward (including young children), with no way of knowing their fate. Some people lost key documents or proof of identity. Others spent days without food or water, and witnessed death and violence while fearing for their own lives. For many, the sight, the smell, the feel of death will never fully leave them. While many lost everything and came out of it with spirits intact, depression and despair can come from losing the material substance of your life, however slight.

**Children in the Eye of the Storm**

People do not have to have a direct connection to a catastrophe in order to suffer as a result of it. Some children and adults are shaken simply by the surprise, or size, or horror of the event. With the earthquake in Japan, tens of thousands of children and families were not only traumatized, but will live even harder lives for months or years to come. Families need to reconstruct their lives -- homes, jobs, schools, and stable families -- even more so. Low-income people tend to fare even worse in nearly all cases of natural disaster. Without any financial cushion, their shelter is more precarious, their “rainy day” resources non-existent, and their ability to evacuate the scene, hampered by no place to go and no way to get there. Often their net worth is not in bank accounts or property, but in the personal possessions that they have managed to accumulate, such as clothes or a favorite chair. At the same time, it is recognized that many people at all income levels lost everything.

**Homelessness**

Losing your home is a horrible thing. No matter how meager your home, no matter how few or how many possessions, losing it all of a sudden is an emotional shock. When children lose their homes in a disaster or personal catastrophe, they may lose a cherished possession (a trinket or picture of their grandparent). They might have also lost friends, routines, traditions, and maybe even their school. The whole architecture of their lives has collapsed. Children may have also lost one or both parents and/or grandparents. If they still have a parent, that parent is in distress and quietly hiding, tired from heroic efforts just to make it through the day, or sad or depressed. And when they reached a shelter, they usually have lost even more: the ability to sleep easily, to bath when they choose, and to move around
freely without the constant presence of an adult. What have children usually found? Orderly but crowded conditions, limited places to play and no private space to pause and be off the beaten path.

Disaster changes us (and our children) in many ways. We are very glad to be alive and safe. But we are the same people in the aftermath. We are still shy or modest, or very private, or picky eaters, or sensitive to noise or smell, or quirky in all the same ways we are at home. Children may have families that have survived to this point by small and large acts of courage and determination; families held together by a strong sense of obligation and love who survived and will help them during their recovery. Or they may be living in groups of strangers outdoors or in temporary camps, or as guests in the homes of others; all circumstances meant to help the child, while being very difficult. Helping homeless children begins by looking beyond their loss and current needs and focusing on their strengths. Don’t forget, even if their families did not survive and they are living with strangers, they still have the human potential for hopes and dreams and it is our responsibility to nurture that spirit.

Children have the capacity to survive terrible circumstances. They are living the only life they know. Much more than adults, most children have a resilience and ability to adapt and orient themselves to new circumstances. They still need the adults around them to be concerned about their housing, food land employment, so they can go about the work of being a child and living the best life they can, in the face of disaster. Many children show great resiliency under these circumstances.

2. Children Need Our Strength

Adults largely set the emotional landscape for children. Children depend on us to be strong and solid, to know what is happening, and to guide them through the shoals of troubled waters.

How did you feel experiencing or watching the horror of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan? Once an unexpected tragedy occurs, feelings of vulnerability and insecurity remain for a very long time. Knowing how you feel and finding your way to higher ground is critical in order to help the children you love and care for. Even when they are babies, children see, hear, and feel our pain and despair, and they look to us for understanding, reassurance, and hope. They have a sixth sense that detects unease and uncertainty. The first step in helping children cope with catastrophe is to sort through our own feelings and get the support that we need. Many of us, at times like these, draw on the support of family and friends. Children need all the love, strength, and reassurance that we can muster. Their sense of safety stems from us: the big, strong adults who protect them from misfortunes that they never imagined.

We all feel and behave differently in response to trauma, and especially an extreme trauma like this that affects hundreds of thousands of people. When everyone around us is affected and the personal safety net of family and friends is no longer in place; the timing and intensity of our feelings and the behavioral changes that follow will still vary from person to person. Some take it all in a great rush that results in an open wound of emotion; others compartmentalize or push feelings down and try to manage or hide the response. The stress in each of our lives varies widely, as do the supports that we have to offset the large and small challenges to our well-being. But somewhere inside, we all feel frightened and
vulnerable. A disaster in which loved ones die or homes are lost is a different category of trauma altogether. The disaster is not simply a traumatic event; it becomes an ongoing, debilitating, and traumatic existence.

**Common Emotional Reactions to Trauma**

If you have suddenly lost loved ones, you are probably in a state of emotional shock and grief, whether it is visible or not. You will have to grieve and then face a new life without the loved one. If you are newly homeless, you will probably arrive at your place of shelter in emotional shock, exhausted, despairing, and disoriented. More important, you don’t need to just get over a great loss and restore your spirit; you need to construct a life and home for you and your children.

- **Shock:** How could this happen?
- **Confusion:** What does it all mean?
- **Fear or worry:** What will happen next; where, when, and to whom? And how will it end?
- **Grief:** For someone I loved, or someone else like me, or the person I was, or the life I led before.
- **Anger:** At the people who didn’t heed the warnings, and at the cruelty and unfairness of it all.
- **Survivor’s Guilt:** Why them and not me? Could I have done more? What can I do now to help those who lost so much?
- **Shame and surprise:** It’s not like me to behave this way: angry, bitter, blaming, or scared.
- **Helplessness:** How can I ever make my world OK again?
- **Sadness:** Lives lost or adrift, children orphaned, futures turned to mud.
- **Isolation or alienation:** I’m probably the only person who feels exactly this way, and I am not sure if anyone understands my feelings.
- **Hopelessness & despair:** I’m not sure my efforts are worth it. What does it matter?

**Common Changes in Behavior**

I don’t know how many times my feelings have fluctuated up and down. And many times I feel nothing, as if I am seeing my children from far away: I know they want me but I have no energy. I either want to hold my children or just get away from everything and everyone. I just want to sleep. My husband either listens to the news all the time or just works; he pays little attention to the rest of the family. He doesn’t sleep much.
Many people respond to trauma with some of the following reactions and changes in behavior:

- Appetite changes
- Change in sleeping patterns
- Anxiety and tension
- Headaches and low resistance to illness
- Crying or depression
- Anger or short temper
- Fatigue, apathy, numbness, or listlessness
- Hyperactivity or mood swings
- Difficulty concentrating
- Numbness or apathy

All of these reactions are normal adult reactions, up to a point. You are not alone in these responses. But when the reaction is intense and prolonged, seeking help is important for you and the children for whom you care.

**Emotional Shock**

Direct survivors of catastrophic events often go into the same emotional shock that follows the sudden death of a spouse, parent, or child. Even if they haven’t lost a family member, they may become seriously dazed and confused and exhibit many if not most of the symptoms of trauma for days, weeks, or even longer if the circumstances continue.

**Taking Care of Yourself**

To take care of children, you need to take care of yourself to the extent that you are able. Some ways to do this are to:

- Accept help from others offering assistance and support with daily responsibilities.
- Try to create a daily routine that supports your current needs and those of your family.
- Given the conditions, do your best to eat right, get exercise and adequate sleep – as much as you are able.
- Cry when you need to, and seek solitude when you have to.
- Try your best to minimize the amount of time you spend with those who make you feel depressed. Be gentle with yourself and others and be tolerant of the less-than-ideal behavior of yourself, children, and others under stress.
- Try to focus on the good things in your days and in your life, and find the seeds of hope.
- Seek help from a disaster professional or medical professional if you feel that life is not becoming more manageable with time.

After a disaster and especially if one is left homeless, many of the above suggestions are very hard to do. Often the most you can do is try your best to be as gentle and accepting of yourself and others as you are able to be.
3. Understanding and Supporting Children

Every Child Is Different

Children are different, both from adults and from each other. But taking that seriously in practice is not always easy for parents and others who work with children. Children think very differently from adults, and at each stage of development they view the world through their own unique lenses. From birth, children have their own sensitivity to change, to unexpected events, and to distress. They respond to dramatic events and stress in their own way and with differing intensity.

All children are vulnerable, but not equally. A child already grieving over a lost loved one (a person or a pet), may be more vulnerable, as will children who have families in crisis, or who are under stress for any number of reasons. Sensitive and empathetic children will also struggle more to come to terms with events that are disturbing.

All children, even babies, will feel the direct effects of natural disaster or family crisis—the emotional upset in the air and the change in people, place, routine, and traditions. Life, as they have come to know it, is disrupted and they are thrown off center. Supporting children during times of uncertainty and stress begins with knowing the child. The best indicators of distress in children are changes in their behavior. Watch for behavior that is not typical for the child: for example, a normally outgoing child behaving shyly or withdrawing, or a child suddenly becoming clingy, irritable, or anger prone. A teenager who is normally cool and distant may withdraw from the family even more or conversely, become very talkative. A child may regress to past behavior, such as thumb sucking or defiance, being very dependent, or not showing the self-help skills of which he or she is capable.

Remember, not all behaviors or behavioral changes stem from a crisis. All the other aspects of life and development are continue, such as adjusting to a new school or having friends or parents who are worried about food and money. These situations all create personal stress that may eclipse societal turmoil.

Fostering Resiliency

Some children seem to bounce back from terrible circumstances and lead emotionally healthy and productive lives. Resiliency can be nurtured. The key ingredient is at least one caring adult who believes in the child and provides role modeling and support, helping the child see his or her life as positive and valuable. It may be a parent, an elder or other relative, teacher, family friend, or even an older sibling.

What frightens children in crisis is the feeling of total helplessness, the feeling that they lack the ability to make any impact on the environment. In many cases, this is brought on by the real loss of family and friends and the feeling there is no one to rely on. Those around them may seem defeated. The caring adult who fosters resiliency nurtures in the child a positive outlook and a sense of personal power, and
helps the child gain mastery over his or her environment. In their book *Raising Resilient Children*, Robert Brooks and Sam Goldstein identified the qualities of caregivers who foster resilient children. They:

- Are empathetic
- Listen and communicate
- Accept children for who they are and help set realistic goals
- Help children feel special and appreciated
- Help children experience positive results and feel competent
- Help children recognize and learn from mistakes
- Develop responsibility, compassion, and a social conscience by providing opportunities to contribute
- Teach how to solve problems and make decisions
- Use discipline and guidance that promotes self-discipline and self-worth
- Change “negative scripts” (thought and behavioral patterns)

If our goal in a crisis is to plant or foster the seeds of resiliency, it is critical to find and support the adults who can play the role of mentor, cheerleader, and guide to the child.

*NOTE: In the next section on supporting children of different ages, it is probable that you will only be able to do some of the things on the lists below that children need in a crisis. Do the best you can, and don’t be hard on yourself for what you can’t do. Your caring and concern alone will go a long way.*

### 4. Children Under Three Years Old

**They know something is up**

Children under the age of three experience tragedy or disaster through their senses. They don’t understand what happened, but absorb the tension, fear, withdrawal, or pain of the people they love and the changes around them (more motion or stillness, sound or silence, the absence of laughter, even the smell of living communally in an evacuation center unlike the wonderful smells of their former home).

Even very young babies react when parents are upset or depressed. Two-year-olds are beginning to understand the concept of pain and may point out hurt people. They also may want to comfort you and others who are upset.

Of course, infants and toddlers will react even more strongly if the tragedy or disaster means the loss of one or more of their special people, or if it means a huge upheaval in daily routines or they lost their home.

Infants and toddlers can only show their distress with the language of their behavior: being irritable and contrary or clingy and tearful. They often show distress through their daily routines: eating, sleeping,
and toileting. Some young children may become listless and apathetic; others may have gastric or bowel problems.

**What Do Children Under Age Three Need?**

- First, attention to the basics: food, water, and a place to sleep will be most important. The evacuation centers provided this very quickly for children and adults.
- Secure holding and comforting physical contact. You can’t offer too much appropriate physical affection at this time. Babies and toddlers need lots of soothing, loving care.
- Understanding that they may need to cry more than usual. Hold lovingly, talk soothingly, and allow the tears to come.
- As much regularity as possible when it comes to sleeping, eating, bathing, and contact with family members.
- Eventually, the comfort of the familiar: it is important to create new routines and favorite rituals.

**5. Three to Five Year Olds**

**They know more than you think, although much of it is incomplete or misconceived**

Like children under three, three- to five-year-olds will react strongly to the loss of loved ones and to changes of place and upheaval in their daily routines. Three- to five-year-olds are much more aware of events around them than babies and far more aware than we may think they are. However, their understanding is limited. They confuse fantasy and reality, time and space, and are working through the concepts of cause and effect and permanence. The idea of “forever” and death itself are not concepts they understand. Their daily world is already populated with monsters, disasters, nightmares, and heroes. To them, the images on the news are not different from the fictional images they see on the television screen. So the impact of a disaster and its aftermath has the same effect that it has on older children and adults: new fears (of floods, fires, destroyed homes), and anxiety (about strong winds, storms, explosions, earthquakes, or buildings falling down). Young children pay attention to adult feelings and words, and anger or despairing words may make them feel insecure.

Preschool-aged children have a conscious awareness that people can come and go, and in times of crisis they are likely to have fears of abandonment. They feel helpless because they now understand that they do need protection and care, and they worry, “Something might happen to those I love and need.”

Play is the way that children make sense of and come to terms with a world that offers surprises and puzzles every day. Play is the way children achieve mastery over the situations in which they are powerless. After earthquakes, tsunamis, or floods, or whenever their lives are touched by violence or death, expect children to work out their thoughts and feelings in play representing the power of nature and the heroes who helped them.
Preschool children need adults who recognize that playing through (working through) life’s horrors is normal, who listen to them, and who do not react harshly, preach, or condemn. Children need to play at being powerful, even evil. Unless play might lead to a child getting hurt physically or emotionally, it is usually best not to intervene, even when their play offends our sensibilities.

When given the chance, children will also use art to work through and express thoughts and feelings. It is often easier for children to draw an event before they can write or talk about it. More than a few parents learn of their seemingly oblivious young child’s knowledge of calamity, war, or terrorism through their child’s pictures of destruction or victims.

**Common Preschool Reactions to Stress**

- Bedwetting
- Fear of the dark, monsters, or animals
- Clinging to familiar adults
- Nightmares
- Toileting accidents — loss of bladder or bowel control, constipation
- Speech difficulties (for example, being at a loss for words or stammering)
- Loss or increase of appetite
- Cries or screams for help
- Fear of being left alone; fear of strangers
- Confusion
- Behavior that challenges others

It is normal for these behaviors to occur from time to time in preschool-age children. The key to determining if they represent trauma is to look for changes in a particular child’s behavior and for new patterns.

**What Do Children Under Age Five Need?**

- As soon as feasible, establish some familiar routines
- Chances to show their feelings (fear, grief, sadness, anger) and receive attention and loving acceptance
- Limited exposure to both the media and adult conversations about the crisis
- Time with calm, loving, reassuring adults
- Much verbal reassurance that you and they will be OK (but acknowledging they may be scared and are not feeling OK now)
- Plenty of physical reassurance (for example, hugs and cuddles)
- Knowledge of where you and the others whom they love are at any given time
- Opportunities for you to listen, have gentle conversation, and share your own feelings
- Opportunities to play and draw to express themselves
- Opportunities for and acceptance of play that may reflect the current events with intervention only to avoid harm
• Special time and reassurance at bedtime, including letting the child sleep with you
• Opportunities to be away from the situation and respite from the focus on the crisis or tragedy
• Opportunities to be physically active
• Opportunities to help others and improve the environment
• Help seeing ahead and preparing for the future

6. School-Age Children

They know much more than you think and want to know more.

As children go the through the school-age years, they increasingly inhabit the world outside the home. They can understand what is real and what is permanent, but they lack perspective. They are learning how events fit together and want to understand how things happen and what impact events will have. They have a lot of questions and expect honest answers about details that matter to them. They understand loss and can identify with the people directly affected by events. They can think about what life is like for others. Their fears are real and realistic from their limited perspective, and they often focus on the fact that bad things could happen to them.

It is a time when they are imagining their adult selves — what they will do when they grow up — and identifying with adult roles. In times of crisis, dramatic and powerful heroes and villains both hold fascination for them. They may find great interest in the rescues they experience or see on screen with boats or helicopters. Increasingly, peers play a larger role in shaping thinking, feelings, and reactions to events.

The transition to formal schooling is an important rite of passage which may be interrupted if children are living in shelters away from their real homes. They may need gentle guidance and reassurance that they will eventually get back to the school they had hoped to attend (if that is the case) or that their new school will be equally good for them.

School-age children are interested in rules and the difference between good and bad, right and wrong. Their sense of fairness and justice can lead to outrage and strong, rigid opinions in the face of injustice and terrible acts. When crisis hits their family or community, they often want to help.

Common School-Age Reactions to Stress

• Nail biting or thumb sucking
• Irritability, whining, clinging
• Aggressive behavior
• Competition with younger siblings for parental attention
• Night terrors, nightmares, fear of the dark
• Avoiding school
• Loss of interest and poor concentration in school
• Withdrawal from peers
• Acting like they did when they were younger. Headaches or other physical complaints
• Depression
• Fears about recurring or new disasters
• A need to take on more responsibility for the family and care for others

What Do School-Age Children Need?

• Opportunities for time with calm, loving, reassuring adults
• Chances to show their feelings (fear, grief, sadness, anger) and receive attention and loving acceptance from caring adults
• Adults who will find out what is on their minds, listen to their stories of what happened, answer their questions honestly with the details that matter to them, and adults who share their own feelings
• Verbal and physical reassurance that you and they will be OK (and acceptance that you and they may be scared and not OK now)
• Knowledge of where the people they love are at any given time
• Guided exposure to the news media and adult discussion
• Opportunities to talk and play with peers and adults
• Opportunities to use art materials or take part in drama to express themselves
• Opportunities to be physically active
• Acceptance from adults of play and dramatic conversation that reflect the current events in their lives and the feelings associated with them
• Relaxed expectations at school or at home during the crisis period
• Reassurance at bedtime, including letting the child sleep with you
• Recognition of their efforts during the disaster
• Opportunities to help others and participate in community efforts
• Help predicting and preparing safety measures to be taken in future disasters
• Opportunities to be away from the situation and respite from the focus on the crisis or tragedy

7. Adolescents and Teenagers

They know much more than you think and want to know more, but not always from you, and they may or may not want to share their thoughts and feelings with you.

As children develop through their teenage years, their ways of being in the world and responding to traumatic events change slowly from the reactions of a child to the reactions of a young adult.

Teenagers often feel overwhelmed by their emotions, even in normal times. They can experience a vast spectrum of ups and downs. Disasters or violent acts add to the mix because they want to be powerful but often feel the opposite — they may shift back and forth from one foot in childhood to the other in young adulthood. At times they will be mature, at other times they will want the security of their younger years. Peers are critically important, and the group reaction can heighten anxieties or leave a
child feeling alone and out of step. Teenagers may respond to traumatic events with either extreme, intense reactions or professed indifference, particularly toward adults. Some will be glued to the radio or television and pore over newspapers and magazines; others will avoid the news. Some may have difficulty expressing caring, concern, and anxiety, while inside they may feel inadequate or guilty. Teenagers often will monitor adult views closely, particularly around bravery, justice, and prejudice. Older teenagers may worry about what the future holds for them in a world where nature’s wrath is likely.

Disasters are difficult for teenagers because they occur at the time of life when they are often beginning to move away from family. They are trying to develop a life in school and teen society. If the world of school is disrupted, or the needs of adults to draw family together grow and peer contact diminishes, teens may struggle.

Times of disaster may be especially difficult for those finishing high school. They may worry about successfully completing their studies this year and if they will be able to appropriately prepare for university exams. They may worry about their futures – “Will there be a job for me when so many adults have lost theirs?”

The direct experience of a disaster may provide teenagers with the opportunity to take responsibility for family and others, and to test out their growing maturity. In doing so, their emotional strength may have increased. But if things didn’t go as they expected, despite their efforts, it might have left them with feelings of guilt or inadequacy.

Common Teenage Reactions to Stress:

- Appetite and sleep disturbances
- Headaches or other physical complaints
- Increase or decrease in energy level
- Indifference, withdrawal, or isolation
- A reduced sense of a future, loss of optimism
- Dark humor, cynicism, or depression
- Confusion/poor concentration
- Poor performance at school or truancy, fighting, withdrawal, loss of interest, attention-seeking behaviors
- Risk-taking behavior or a fear of taking risks
- Rebellion in the home, aggressive behavior
- Refusal to be cooperative

**What Do Teenagers Need?**

- To know that you are there for them when they need it (and want it)
- Chances to show their feelings (fear, grief, sadness, anger), tell their story of what happened and receive attention and caring acceptance (even if they are slow to start talking)
- To know your whereabouts (even if they don’t admit it)
• Your willingness to engage in serious discussions
• To be offered opportunities to talk about feelings — yours and theirs — honestly, but without adults being intrusive and with adults listening rather than lecturing
• Opportunities for them to talk about their feelings about natural disaster, the environment, poverty, justice, tolerance, death and other social or political issues.
• Your best and wisest adult perspective on serious issues and your acceptance of their views
• Time with peers for play and discussion
• Opportunities to be physically active
• Adults who encourage participation in social activities, athletics, clubs, etc.
• Opportunities to help others and be involved in the response to crisis
• Group planning for safety measures to be taken in future disasters
• Structured but undemanding responsibilities
• Encouragement and support to take care of themselves: eating well, sleeping sufficiently, exercising regularly
• Temporarily relaxed expectations of performance
• Individual attention and consideration when they ask for it
• Opportunities to be away from the situation and respite from the focus on the crisis or tragedy
• Recognition of their growing competence, maturity, and any of their efforts during the disaster
• Opportunities to take responsibility, help others, or improve the environment
• Help predicting and preparing safety measures to be taken in future disasters

8. Ways to Help Children Cope With Stress: A Quick Summary

1. Be available
2. Listen, listen, and listen some more
3. Be honest and answer their questions — at their level
4. Respect differences in children — individual and age based
5. Encourage consistency, everyday routines, and favorite rituals
6. Make the environment safe for talking about feelings and thoughts
7. Expect and allow for all kinds of emotion; encourage the showing and release of feelings
8. Give choices and be flexible — avoid power struggles
9. Allow a lot of opportunities and different media for expression
10. Encourage activity and play
11. Support the child’s friendships and social network
12. Be a model as a human being
13. Give a hug
14. Practice patience
15. Support children – even when they’re at their worst
16. Expect behavior that is typical of a younger child
17. Expect behavior that is beyond the child’s years
18. Help them to live right as much as you can— eat, rest, sleep
19. Resist overprotection
20. Don’t force conversation and interaction
21. Understand that playing is a way to grieve and sort through fears and confusion
22. Attend to their physical symptoms of stress
23. Reassure the child that he or she has help and support from parents
24. Set limits on acceptable behavior, and enforce them
25. Remember triggers that will cause distress
26. Be available for help if needed
27. Take care of yourself

* This list was adapted from 35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child (The Dougy Center for Grieving Children).

There is no perfect formula or single right way to respond to a child in crisis. It is important to know and respect each child’s way of coping, even when it is different from our own.

9. When to Seek Help

Reactions to traumatic events may appear immediately, or may appear after several days or weeks. Most of the time, the symptoms detailed above will begin to disappear as the child and family readjust. But for children who experience disaster directly and intensely, or if symptoms accumulate or persist over time, it is wise to seek help outside the family through a community health center, or trusted adults in the community.
Helping Children Live in the World

What kind of people do we want our children to become?

Children need our views about life, the natural world, and social issues articulated in language they are developmentally able to understand. They observe not just what we say but what we do. How and what we teach our children depends on who we are: our civic nature, our spirituality, and our willingness to learn about events, respond with compassion and generosity, and pass that empathy on to our children.

1. Helping Children Understand Natural Disaster and Catastrophe

When crisis or catastrophe envelops our children’s world, the most important thing we can do, after ensuring their physical safety, is to be thoughtful and responsive to their emotional and educational needs. The community is a safe haven where children can express their ideas and fears with assurance that their parents and other adults will protect them and teach them about the world that they will inherit.

Children’s Understanding of the Natural World

Our planet is a wonderful place for life. The natural world: the earth, sun, wind, water, and fire all work together to make it possible for us to live. But nature is far more powerful than human beings, and there are times that natural events create terrible conditions for people. Understanding and respecting the planet and all its forces of nature is important to safe living. All but the very youngest children can learn that nature is a powerful force in shaping and sustaining life on the planet. Children need to understand that all the powers and properties of nature are interrelated. Human beings are just one part of it. There is a purpose for natural phenomena, and even the most negative events can have positive effects: floods distribute soil to farmland, for example, and fires help create new forest growth.

Children’s Fears

Many of the questions and concerns that surface in times of crisis have at their heart the fundamental questions. Will I be OK again? Will you be OK? Will everyone I know and love be OK? Will the world that I know be OK? Help the child:

- Identify his or her own fears through gentle conversation that follows the child’s lead. Some children may want to tell the story of what happened to them over and over again. This is helpful and should be encouraged.
• Always try to be realistic while reassuring the child that many lives were saved by planning and preparedness. New policies are being put in place that will make every effort to keep people even safer in future tsunamis.
• Assure the child that everything is being done to make sure they are as safe as they can be and that they are prepared.
• Respect the child’s fears. In the aftermath of natural disasters, many children and adults will increase their fear of storms, floods, tornados, tsunamis, and earthquakes. With young children, the best way to break down the fear is through your strong, calm, thoughtful presence. Older children also rely upon the strong presence of adults and their rationality and optimism. Children need to hear that:
  o People are working very hard to get us food and supplies and repair our country.
  o Our family knows what to do if we are in any danger.

2. Answering Children’s Questions

The aftermath of any disaster leaves us with hard questions to answer. Children need the opportunity to talk about the emotions and issues that are in the air around them. As they get older and their understanding of the world outside their home grows, they also need our honest answers to the larger issues: “Why is life so unpredictable?” “Why do natural and manmade disasters create catastrophe and tragedy?” “Why do innocent people die?”

Some questions may test our fundamental social, political, and religious views: “Is nature mad at us?” “Why do some people die and some live?” “Why can’t people be saved faster?” “Why does our family have so little and there are many families that have so much?” “Why did we lose everything we had?”

Children need our best answers, or our honest lack of an answer. Sometimes all we can say is that “Bad things happen to good people and we don’t know why.” They need our thoughtfulness and willingness to help them seek answers. No child will ever thank us for lying to him or avoiding her questions.

Before Talking to Children

Even if we only have a moment to think about what to say and how to say it, try to remember to:

• Get your own thoughts and feelings straight. Have another adult listen to you first if you aren’t sure you are ready to talk to your child or another child.
• Try to be your most thoughtful, calm, and emotionally stable self when you talk to children. Be prepared for difficult questions about what bad things could happen to us, why people die, and why some people live.
• Parents might ask leading questions: “Perhaps you are wondering why bad things could happen to us,” or “why people die and some people live.”
• Think not only about what you want to say, but also about how you want it to come across.
• Watch your words, tone, and body language. You may give a nonverbal message of calm, sadness, anger, confusion, or indifference without even being aware of it.
• Ask children what they think the words that they are using or hearing mean: death, earthquake, tremors, loss, disaster, radiation, hero.
• Understand what they already know and feel before beginning any dialogue by asking “What are you thinking and feeling?”
• Find natural opportunities to ask what’s on the child’s mind and follow his or her lead. Recognize the clues in a child’s art, play, or conversations with friends. For many children, it is more comfortable to express concerns in these ways than through words. When you encourage a young child to draw, play, or talk about his or her feelings, you give permission to freely express scary or angry thoughts. Accept his or her feelings.
• Honestly share your feelings, but try to be in control of your emotions in the presence of your children.
• Be strong in a crisis even when feeling sad, scared, confused, or angry. The child needs to draw upon your strength, not take care of you.
• Provide the child hope by simply sharing hugs or reassuring smiles that say, “I will help you and we will make it through this.” While a young child may need to hear, “Lots of strong, smart people are working hard to keep us safe,” an older child may need to help you plan what to do next for your family.
• Try to monitor children’s exposure to media coverage of disasters and crises. Children have not seen much of life or weathered many storms and can easily feel that everything, everyone, everywhere is coming apart.
• Respect the growing ability of school-age children and teenagers to understand and discuss issues openly and honestly.

Stay tuned in to children.

• Keep listening, asking, conversing with, and reassuring the child as his or her thoughts and feelings evolve. Remember that every child is different. The explanation of national, global, or personal events needs to match the child’s developmental understanding and personality. Don’t give more information than the child is ready for.

Protect your child’s idealism.

• Children are born idealists. For them, the world is a good place where nature is usually friendly and predictable, people are mostly good, and life is worth living. Sudden exposure to catastrophe or violence tests their idealism and optimism as well as ours. If children are exposed to too much of life’s dark side, they may lose their sense of optimism.

3. Answering Questions about Natural Disasters

That river—it was full of good and evil together. It would water the fields when it was curbed, but then if an inch were allowed it, it crashed through like a roaring dragon. PEARL S. BUCK (THE OLD DEMON)
What is an earthquake?

For preschool children:

An earthquake is when the ground starts shaking. The shaking may shatter buildings or break up roads. Or the ground may develop big cracks or holes. Many people are working to protect us from earthquakes and to help us be prepared. There are special rules in Japan about how to build buildings that let them jiggle a little during earthquakes so they won’t fall down.

For older children:

The Earth is divided into three layers: the core, the mantle, and the crust. Deep in the middle is a solid metal core which is very hot, and also an outer core which is liquid. The outer core is about 1,300 miles thick and the inner core is about 800 miles to the center of the earth. Next is a layer of hot minerals, called the mantle, which is flexible like plastic. The top layer is called the crust. All the oceans and the land are the top of the crust. The crust is typically about 25 miles thick beneath continents, and about 6.5 miles thick beneath oceans. The crust is relatively light and brittle. Most earthquakes occur within the crust.

Under the crust are tectonic plates made out of rock. These plates move all the time, but so slowly we can’t even feel it. The breaks in between the plates are called faults. Sometimes, a plate rubs or bumps into another and this causes an earthquake. Earthquakes create shocks and aftershocks that can be large or small. We may not even notice all the small earthquakes, but large earthquakes have destroyed cities and killed thousands of people. Scientists are working hard to learn more about how to predict earthquakes and warn people. They are also working on how to protect buildings and other structures so that they can reduce the damage to life and property. Japan has been recognized around the world for its high standards of preparing our buildings and roads to be safe in case of earthquakes.

What are Aftershocks?

For preschool children:

Aftershocks happen sometime after the first earthquake. They are smaller earthquakes which happen close to the first earthquake. Just like with earthquakes, many people are working to protect us from aftershocks and to help us be prepared. Aftershocks may happen for awhile after the first main earthquake.

For older children:

Aftershocks happen sometime after the first earthquake. They are smaller earthquakes that occur close to the site of the original earthquake. Aftershocks happen because the tectonic plates and faults are trying to stabilize the ground after the initial earthquake. In the Great East Japan Earthquake, there have been many aftershocks because such a large part of the tectonic plate was affected by the first earthquake. Scientists are working hard to predict aftershocks and warn people, and also to protect
people and buildings. Some scientists think the aftershocks from the Great East Japan Earthquake could last up to a year.

What is a Tsunami?
For preschool children:
A tsunami is caused by an earthquake that happens beneath the sea. The earthquake can cause a big wave to form that can come onto the land and cause floods.

For older children:
A tsunami or tidal wave is a giant wave of water up to hundreds of feet high (as big as a big building) that is triggered by an underwater earthquake; it rolls to the shore and knocks down and floods anything in its path. The bigger the tsunami, the farther the wave will reach on the shore and flood more land. Scientists hope to find ways to give people in coastal areas more warning before a tsunami strikes so that they can move farther away and to higher areas.

What is a Flood?
For preschool children:
Floods are when there is so much water that water covers everything.

For older children:
A flood is when lots of water flows into a dry area. Too much rain causes rivers, streams, or lakes to overflow their banks and flood surrounding areas. High ocean levels and high waves can also cause a flood. Sometimes the structures used to control flooding such as dams, levees, or floodwalls break and the water released floods an area. A flash flood happens all of a sudden after a sudden rain. Floods usually take time to develop, and the location can be predicted and planned for. Floods happen because water flows downhill due to gravity. People who live in areas where flooding is common can be careful and plan to escape when floods are likely.

What is Radiation?
For preschool children:
Radiation is something you can’t see. Sometimes it can help you and sometimes it can hurt you, but people are working really hard to protect you from bad radiation.

For older children:
Radiation is energy that we can’t see. Radiation can help us generate electricity or find and treat health problems. For example, sometimes when you go to the dentist, you might get an x-ray to help the dentist see inside your teeth for problems. With an x-ray, you get a tiny little bit of radiation and that is okay. But lots of radiation can be harmful. It can make people sick.
There are places throughout the world called “power plants” (or nuclear plants) where radiation is used to create electricity. Mostly, these are very, very safe, but sometimes, an accident can cause damage to the plant and radiation can get out that wasn’t supposed to. This happened on March 11, 2011 when the Japanese earthquake and tsunami damaged the power plants. Later earthquakes and aftershocks also affected the power plants’ security. People are doing everything they can to protect you from harmful radiation.

4. Answering the Questions of Child Survivors

During a disaster, everyone feels scared, even the wonderful people who rescue others. Some are probably both scared and brave at the same time. Lots of people stay scared for a long time and have nightmares and scary thoughts. Police officers, fire fighters, and the soldiers all feel scared sometimes too.

Questions about feelings may be some of the toughest for us to answer as we haven’t always dealt with our own feelings. As with other areas, listening is the most important thing you can do.

My mom is really sad and not herself. Sometimes I think it is my fault. What can I do?

Even if you are not the perfect kid in the time of crisis, how your Mom feels is not your fault! When it’s a bad time for your Mom, try to be helpful and not get in her way. She has a lot on her mind and, like you, is feeling sad and trying to figure out what to do. She will get better and will keep you safe.

I miss my ______ (relative, friend, pet). What can I do? (Sample question from child three or older)

Remember all the good things about____. Draw some pictures, tell some stories and let yourself cry. If your ____ is separated from you or missing, don’t give up hope that everything will work out. Remember that ____ loved you, and you will always have special memories of your time together. It’s OK to still talk to ____ or act out what you would say if ____ were still here.

5. Answering Children’s Questions about Death

Nobody ever told me that grief felt so much like fear. C.S. LEWIS (A GRIEF OBSERVED)

For every age, the answer is a developmentally appropriate version of “Everything that is alive dies sometimes. Death is a part of life.” Natural disasters, as with terrorism or war, bring the idea and reality of death to the foreground of children’s lives. Adults create a climate of security or insecurity by their behaviors. If children experience a wall of silence or a storm of grief, they may not feel able to ask questions. Adults need to try to establish an atmosphere where children’s feelings, questions, and needs are taken into account. This is also a place where families can draw on their own personal faith.

Why do people (or pets) die?

While it is very sad when people or animals that we care about die, we need to remember how wonderful it was to have our time with them and keep them alive in our memories. Children under three
years old deeply experience the death of a loved one but their limited verbal skills make it difficult for us to know what they are feeling. They need our presence, warmth, and strength. The world of infants and toddlers is a sensory place. They feel changes in their environment and will notice the absence of a beloved caregiver. They also respond to the grief and sadness of those around them and may become less responsive or show changes in crying, eating and sleeping. They will need as much consistent comfort and nurturing as possible. Both infants and toddlers need to know that the person they loved is not coming back, even though infants may not understand the words.

To preschool children, death is another mysterious part of life. If someone who cares for them dies, they often feel abandoned. It is the absence that counts because they don’t understand the finality of death or the emotional weight of grieving. Be prepared for preschoolers to ask multiple times when the person is coming back. Because young children believe the world revolves around them, they may feel that a death was something that they caused. They need reassurance that the person’s absence is not the result of their own actions or feelings.

Older children understand that death is permanent and share our struggle with coming to terms with the "why" of it, "why now," and "how will we carry on and how will we get through it?" They can begin to identify with the loss that others experience. The knowledge that death is final leaves them wondering about their own death and the possible deaths of people they know. They may feel that death is a punishment for those who died or their loved ones. Reading books and having conversations both prior to and after the death of a loved one can help children understand that death is part of the cycle of life. Death is also simply interesting to school-age children. They are often fascinated with the cause and the details of the death and its aftermath. They understand death as a physical experience and often are concerned about the body, as many preschool aged children would be as well: What happened to it? What will happen to it now?

Some tips for supporting grieving children:

- If you can, give extra attention to grieving children. Any extra support will be extremely valuable to the child. Listening to someone cry, talking or just being together is comforting.
- Children need a chance to say good-bye either at a funeral or in a personal and private ritual.
- Don’t worry if kids “play” death. This is their way of making sense of it.
- If you have them, give the child pictures or mementos of the person who died.

Children and families who have or are experiencing the death of a loved one under traumatic circumstances need to draw on extended family and friends for support. They should also take advantage of the resources provided by employers and community agencies.

6. How Can We Feel Safe and Be Safe?

Children who have experienced a disaster directly or indirectly need reassurance that they will be safe. They have learned that nature is terrifyingly powerful. Now they need to know that no earthquake,
tsunami or flood has to harm them if they respect nature and are prepared. They need to feel in control and powerful through their own efforts and through those of the competent adults around them. The key to both feeling safe and being safe is to be prepared. The more that even very young children are involved in the process of planning safety efforts, the more they will see natural disasters as a part of life they can manage.

Make a Helping Plan

Japan has the best earthquake preparation plans in the world. Many people were saved in the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake because of the preparation plans in place. Similar to national plans, it is helpful for families to have their own preparation plans in case they need to move to another temporary shelter or make other changes. Even little children can be involved in planning by identifying one thing they would want to take with them if they have to leave their current site quickly. One personal item can provide a sense of security.

7. Helping Children Grow and Thrive

The people of Japan are good and resilient. They have dealt with earthquakes and tsunamis since the beginning of time, and have always been able to rebuild their communities. Even after March 11th, 2011 when they experienced the 5th worst earthquake recorded in history, the resilience and strength of the Japanese people will get them through. At the same time, the parents, teachers and others who work with children are faced with many difficult issues. Life in a group setting inevitably involves accepting or reconciling different viewpoints. We all bring not only our own personalities and emotions into our work with children but our own politics, religion, and world viewpoints as well. The news may be filled with stories about people and events we have strong feelings toward or know very little about.

Crises can bring out the best and worst in each of us. The worst: selfishness and simplistic answers, blaming, avoidance, bias, or proceeding as if nothing has changed. The best: thoughtfulness, caring, kindness, courage, and the opportunity to guide children to important learning. Children learn from how people and communities respond in times of crisis. Adults need to model and teach the following:

**Thoughtfulness:** We need to make an effort to understand what others think and develop a broader perspective that respects the natural world.

**Caring:** We are not alone. We live in a world of communities of children and families. Our interdependent future depends on mutual caring.

**Kindness:** Human beings here are hurting. Those who were less affected by the tragedy can reach out to those more affected by the earthquake and tsunami.

**Courage:** It takes courage to help others in their confusion, fear, loss, or grief while we tend to our own.

**Learning:** It will help others and ourselves if we keep learning more about what we can do to help rebuild our communities, both the physical rebuilding, and the “building up” of our children and adults.
Responsibility: It is our planet, our society, and our community. We need to take care of the world that we live in today and will inherit.

Finding the Strength and Goodness in Children

Disasters and crises are not only about needs. Although catastrophes may expose our frailties and vulnerabilities, they also can uncover our strengths, courage, and goodness. That is true for children as well. Author Robert Coles in *Children of Crisis: a Study of Courage and Fear* (Atlantic —Little, Brown, 1964, p.329) observed forty years ago that a middle-class parent was more interested in what was good for his children than what good he might ask of them. Coles was struck by the contrast with the “goodness” and moral courage that he saw in action as 6-year-old Ruby Bridges almost single-handedly integrated the schools of New Orleans in the United States, and other young black children all over the southern US joined the front lines of the American civil rights movement, facing angry mobs, water hoses, and police dogs. His observation applies today: Many of us as parents spend more time trying to provide the goods and the good life for our children than finding the goodness in our children.

Even young children are capable of courage, compassion, and contributions to the community if we involve them in the life outside the home. Even the youngest can be part of the excellent disaster relief efforts already underway. Recognizing and honoring their individual and developmental capacity and competence not only helps children cope, but is the essence of raising children to be contributing members of the society that they will inherit.

What Those Who Work With Children Can Do

While parents should use children’s questions and statements as “learnable moments” to impart their moral and religious thinking and values about basic issues, teachers or relief workers should help children with anxiety, confusion, or interest without expressing their own religious or political views. In the long-term, provide learning opportunities:

- Expand children’s knowledge of the natural world through projects and experiments that involve growing things or temperature.
- Provide books at the appropriate level that address the issues of natural disasters, poverty, respect for others, conflict, and overcoming fear and adversity.
- Ensure that the curriculum includes children’s current interests and concerns.

Help children cope and succeed

- Provide materials that encourage children’s play and expression of their feelings and thoughts. Children need to work through issues, so allow fantasy play or art as long as it does not hurt others.
- Value and respect individual children, and try to eliminate stressful situations when necessary (new transitions, unnecessary challenges).
Encourage an active, participatory process

- Sustain or create a classroom with participatory decision-making. Make the group safe for discussion of conflicting ideas.
- Create opportunities for cooperation: projects, chores, decision-making.

Grow good people

- Honor differences and go beyond acceptance and tolerance. Research and respect differences in identity, culture, economic differences, and beliefs.
- Notice poverty, unfairness, and injustice in daily life and the news, and call children’s attention to them as appropriate.
- Encourage empathy by encouraging the safe and respectful discussion of feelings of hurt, fear, loss, and doubt (without forcing participation).
- Become sensitive to hurtful language and teach children to be alert to it.
- Try to find hope, goodness, and courage in every tragedy. Help children to see caring, courage, tolerance, and compassion in them.

Grow good citizens

- Help children take action, and take action with them: for example, write letters, send pictures, raise money, and connect with others.
- Involve children in local and global humanitarian efforts.
- Treat families as partners. Keep parents and family members informed and involve them in your efforts.

8. What Happens Now? Toward a Better World

In times of crisis, it is important to find strength and reassurance in our communities, our diversity, and our common commitment to learning how to develop a better world. How we live our lives, the resources we consume, and the policies our governments pursue, all have an effect on the natural world. Children need to be taught about nature and the earth; the natural forces that can affect our own lives and the lives of children and adults around the globe. Children need to develop an empathy and thoughtfulness that underlie their judgment. They need to learn how to work together to solve problems and draw upon the strength of their family, community, nation, and the world. A catastrophe or crisis that spurs us to respond with compassion and support can also remind us that pain and suffering, grief or loss, are not confined to world-shattering events. Every day, children around the world need our compassion and support for tragedies and struggles both large and small. Children are always surrounded by heroes. In addition to the firefighters, police, rescue workers, armed forces, and all those who helped the victims or survived the devastation, there are others:

- Parents, teachers, and other adults who give children their strength when they themselves are overwhelmed with their own feelings of uncertainty, fear, or grief.
• Children who help to protect themselves and their families, acting bravely as they flee or endure natural disasters.
• Children and adults who recognize they can support others in crisis and provide time, energy, or material resources to help others.

When the noise is deafening and the darkness grows, or the ground shakes or opens up, children need all the shelter and light that we can bestow upon them. We need to always remember that children have the strength and goodness within them to make the world a better place in the future.
RESOURCES


APA: The American Psychological Association offers some resources for coping after the earthquake.

http://www.brighthorizons.com/TalktoChildren/

Bright Horizons: Bright Horizons Family Solutions has partnered with Mercy Corps to form the Comfort for Kids project, which provides resources to children victimized by the earthquake in Japan and information about helping children cope with natural disasters and catastrophe.

http://www.dougy.org/grief-resources/

The Dougy Center: the National Center for Grieving Children and Families, provides support and training nationally and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children in grief.

http://www.epa.gov/radiation/

The United States Environmental Protection Agency offers resources and information regarding radiation.

www.mercycorps.org

Mercy Corps: An international relief and development organization whose website provides information on programs all over the world and shows how to get help, give help, share grief, and help children cope.
BACKGROUND ON WHAT HAPPENED TO OUR WORLD?

This 2011 adaptation of What Happened to OUR World? Helping Children Cope with Natural Disaster and Catastrophe following the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake is a resource for parents, teachers, and anyone working with children. Adults and children throughout the world periodically experience or witness the effects of natural disasters. Thousands of people can be directly affected, and many suffer significant loss or trauma.

What Happened to Our World is part of a series of booklets written to help adults peer into the minds of children from infancy through the teenage years, and understand their confusion, fears, grief, and struggles to understand why the forces of nature can suddenly disrupt or destroy the world as they know it. It is to help both those who experience and survive catastrophe firsthand, as well as the children who witness from a distance and wonder what it was like or whether someday they will find themselves in similar circumstances.

Extraordinary events like these test us all as citizens and human beings. They test us as parents, both as guardians of our children trying to keep them emotionally safe, and as our children’s teachers trying to raise them to become enlightened and empathetic adults. Children grow into the kind of people they will become at least in part by how we guide them through their questions, concerns, and fears, and whether we use the teachable moments thrust upon us to provide them with support, care, and guidance.

Jim Greenman (1949-2009) was a legend in the field of early education who brought respect to early educators by insisting on respect for young children. At Bright Horizons, where he served as Senior Vice President of Education and Program Development until his passing in 2009, his impact can be felt in gentle book nooks in the toddler classroom, in the preschool’s dramatic play corner, and in the spots on the playground dedicated to the exploration of even the youngest infants. His passionate advocacy for children in need can be seen in his leadership of the Bright Horizons Foundation for Children. And whether in the Head Start programs of his earliest years, in the Bright Spaces he helped to build across the U.S. and Europe, or his global reach at Bright Horizons, Jim was dedicated to ensuring that all children, no matter their circumstances, have spaces to call their own, to learn, to be safe and to grow.
Mercy Corps helps people turn the crises they confront into the opportunities they deserve. Driven by local needs, our programs provide communities in the world's toughest places with the tools and support they need to transform their own lives. Our worldwide team in 36 countries is improving the lives of 19 million people.  [www.mercycorps.org](http://www.mercycorps.org)

Founded in 1986, Bright Horizons Family Solutions is the world's leading provider of employer-sponsored child care, back-up child and adult/elder care, educational consulting advising for employees and their families, and work/life consulting. Condu...