

March 22, 2011

## Talking to Children about the Disaster in Japan

The earthquake and tsunami that hit Japan has evoked many emotions including sadness, grief and helplessness in many around the world.

As children may be struggling with their thoughts and feelings about the stories and images, they may turn to trusted adults for help and guidance.

- Start the conversation. Talk about the event with your child. Not talking about it makes the event even more threatening in your child's mind. Silence suggests that what has occurred is too horrible to even speak of or that you may not know about what has happened. Chances are your child has already heard about it.
- What does your child already know? Start by asking what your child has already heard about the events from the media as well as from friends. Listen for what understanding he has reached. As your child explains, listen for misinformation, misconceptions and underlying fears or concerns.
- Gently correct inaccurate information. If you hear inaccurate information or misunderstandings, provide the correct information at a level that your child can understand.
- Encourage your child to ask questions, and answer those questions directly. Your child may have some difficult questions about the events in Japan. For example, she may ask if it is possible that an earthquake could occur that would impact the family; she is probably really asking whether it is "likely" – when appropriate, reassure her the risk of an earthquake in your community is quite low. She is also asking if she is safe. This may be a time to review plans your family has of assuring safety in the event of any crisis situation. Whatever questions your child may have, answer. This lets her know that you are open to talking about anything and can be trusted to answer. Include in your answers any information you may have on efforts being made in Japan to help the people there. Like adults, children are better able to cope with a crisis if they feel they understand it. Question-and-answer exchanges help ensure ongoing support as your child begins to understand the crisis and the response to it.
- Limit media exposure. Limit your child's media exposure to images and sounds related to the disaster. Remember children often overhear or see what you are watching on t.v. or listening to on the radio. For the very young, exposure should be rare. Remember to limit your own exposure. Adults may become more distressed with nonstop exposure to the event.

- Helping those in need. Work with your child to figure out a way that she can help the people who were affected by the disaster, such as making a card that can be sent (often agencies such as churches or Red Cross will accept such cards). If they work, this may include making a small donation from their earnings or allowance. Children may also find benefit in helping others in need in their own community. When children help others, they increase their resilience (their ability to bounce back from stressful events).
- Be a positive role model. Consider sharing your feelings about the events in Japan with your child. This is an opportunity for you to role model how to cope and how to plan for the future. Before you reach out, however, be sure you are able to express a positive or hopeful plan. Included in being a good role model is showing good self-care by getting enough rest, eating well, and exercising.
- Be patient. In times of stress, children may have more trouble with their behavior, concentration, and attention. They will need a little extra patience, care, and love.
- If you have concerns about your child's behavior, contact your family's pediatrician, other primary care provider, or a qualified mental health care specialist.

For more information on how to help your children cope with disasters, visit the following websites:

- National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement at [www.cincinnatichildrens.org/school-crisis](http://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/school-crisis) (which includes a helpful booklet on how to talk with children who are grieving)
- American Academy of Pediatrics website at [www.aap.org/disasters/adjustment.cfm](http://www.aap.org/disasters/adjustment.cfm)
- American Psychological Association at [www.apahelpcenter.org](http://www.apahelpcenter.org)
- FEMA at [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov)
- National Association of School Psychologists at [www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis\\_safety](http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety)