

In The Aftermath of Natural Disasters: Helping Children Cope

- ⇒ **BE SELECTIVE WITH MEDIA:** Limit viewing of the disaster and its aftermath, especially for younger children. When children are exposed to TV, watch with them. Be especially careful if your family is still awaiting news of a missing loved one, as this may increase your child grief and anxiety. When they do watch, please use the time to discuss what they're seeing and share feelings about it.
- ⇒ **MAINTAIN FAMILIAR ROUTINES AND LIMITS:** In the midst of uncertainty, children find great security in knowing their own immediate world remains constant. Keep regular mealtimes and bedtimes as well as familiar rules and limits. Sticking to these routines will provide a safe setting for your child to process the emotions and questions related to earthquakes and natural disasters.
- ⇒ **LISTEN TO YOUR CHILDREN:** What are they asking with their questions? Are you noticing changes in their behavior? Start by finding out what your child has already heard or understood. Listen for misconceptions or fears. Their words, actions, and behaviors may tell you what they are thinking and feeling and what they need to know. Give focused attention and try neither to minimize nor over-dramatize their concerns.
- ⇒ **ANSWER QUESTIONS HONESTLY AND SIMPLY:** Children are better able to cope with something if they understand it. Be sensitive to your child's age and developmental level. Generally, older children seek and benefit from more detailed information than younger children. Follow your own child's cues about how much information to give.
- ⇒ **REACH OUT TO HELP AND SUPPORT OTHERS:** One of the consequences of a traumatic event of this magnitude is that it creates and enhances feelings of powerlessness in both children and adults. Taking action can be helpful. Ask older children what they think they can do to be helpful. Writing letters, drawing pictures, donating food or clothes or money, and volunteering your time are all examples of different ways children and adults can take action.
- ⇒ **FIND THINGS TO DO THAT ARE ENJOYABLE:** Don't forget to have fun and play together. While many adults wonder whether it is all right to have pleasure while others suffer, children must see us having a good time to feel secure about their own lives.
- ⇒ **PROVIDE REASSURANCE AND HOPE:** Reassure children that they are safe and that many adults are working to ensure the safety of the people of Haiti. Take this opportunity to model an example of how to cope positively and talk about the variety of people who are helping: rescue workers, soldiers, EMT, police officers, firefighters, clean-up crews, doctors, nurses, etc... Even in the face of uncertainty it can be helpful to children if you remain cautiously optimistic and hopeful in order to avoid magnifying you or your child's suffering while not knowing or the disappointment upon receiving difficult news.