



## **Institute for Disaster Mental Health**

### **Disaster in Haiti: Helping Children Understand the Tragedy**

Children throughout the United States have been exposed to media coverage of the devastating earthquakes in Haiti, and just as adults are, many are struggling to understand the scope of the event and to cope with their own emotional reactions. The following are ways that parents or caregivers can help children of different ages cope productively with their sadness and anxiety.

#### Limit and Supervise Media Exposure

Children are perceptive and are constantly aware of what is occurring around them. By now, most children have seen images of the devastation in Haiti. Although they may not fully understand what has occurred, images in the media are powerful and convey suffering and pain, things that even young children can connect with on an emotional level.

It is best to limit your child's exposure to powerful media images. If you are worried about what your child may be hearing or seeing on television, supervise their TV time. Spend time with your child watching TV programs and be available to discuss their reactions to any information about the earthquake in Haiti.

#### Understand Common Reactions and Concerns

When children are not given an opportunity to discuss their reactions to powerful images in the media, they are likely to feel confused and upset by what they have seen.

At all ages, children are likely to have concerns about their safety and the safety of others. Additional specific reactions to media coverage of disasters will be impacted by their emotional sensitivity and their ability to understand what has occurred.

Younger children may be scared by images of people who have been injured and homes that have been destroyed. They are likely to express concern about their safety and the safety of specific people that they have seen in the media. They may want to know what would happen to them and their toys if an earthquake were to happen in their neighborhood.

School-aged children will want to understand the details of what has occurred. They try to understand what has happened by asking questions about what took place, when things occurred, where it took place, and who was involved.

Like young children and school-aged children, adolescents are also concerned with their safety and the safety of those that they love. Additionally, adolescents may be saddened or angered by what they perceive to be unjust or unfair. They are likely to be concerned about why such devastation occurs and why more has not been done to help.

### Talking with Children

As a parent, you have the potential to help your child understand that a sad and scary thing has happened, that many people were affected and are getting help, and that you and your family are safe. Above all else, it is important to give your child the chance to talk about what they've seen and heard. The facts of the situation are not nearly as important as your child's thoughts and feelings about what has occurred. It is important to listen to your child's perspective and to then reassure them of their personal safety.

**Listening** to your child gives them a chance to express themselves and an opportunity for you to reassure your child, making sure their needs are met. After you've talked with your child, **reassure** them of your ability to protect them and keep them safe.

The way that you talk about these things will vary depending on your child's developmental level. In general, the younger the child, the less factual information you need to provide.

You might start off a conversation with a school-aged child by saying something like "What have you heard or seen about things in Haiti?" Listen to your child's concerns and do your best to address them. Children may feel confused or helpless. Answer questions and provide your child with ways to make a difference. Some children may worry about their own personal safety or the safety of family members. If so, develop a family preparedness plan.

Adolescents will have access to the same information that adults have access to. They are not only exposed to passing images on television or in print, but they may also seek information on the Internet and read news-related stories. Having an open and honest conversation with your adolescent will give you the opportunity to discuss their emotional reactions, sort through any confusion they may be experiencing, figure out what they believe, and find a way to make a difference.

### Helping Others

In a time of great devastation and confusion, as a parent, you have the opportunity to encourage empathy and compassion in your child. If your child wants to make a difference, find a way for your child to participate in the relief efforts. Consider hosting a fundraiser, contributing to a clothing drive, or calling your local American Red Cross chapter to discuss ways to participate in their relief efforts. Even better, help your child come up with creative ideas of their own.

Allowing your child to talk about their understanding of things, reassuring them, and giving them a chance to be empowered will help your child remain well-adjusted while coming to terms with the difficult lesson that disasters do happen.