

Disaster relief

How to help your kids make sense in the face of the senseless tragedy in Haiti

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Children of United Nations workers hold candles during a vigil for United Nations workers and other victims of Haiti, earthquake near the United Nations in New York Jan. 15. (REUTERS/Brendan McDermida)

Relentless, uncensored exposure to the immense pain, suffering and devastation of the Haitian earthquake victims erodes childhoods.

Disaster may be thousands of miles away but "it sure doesn't look like that when they see people and possibly other children crying, hurt or even dead just a few feet away in their living room on their big, flat screen HD TV or computer. It becomes very present and very real," says Dr. Charlotte Reznick.

According to the recognized child educational psychologist and associate clinical professor at UCLA, "when children are pummeled with images and information of crisis and disasters from around the world on a regular basis, each time it takes a piece out of what we hope for our children - a childhood that is carefree and happy.

"Imagine a beautiful, delicate, and priceless garment - your child - being attacked from the outside, ripped, burned, or torn apart... that's what it's like whenever kids are continually exposed to horrors or the world."

They do not need to see "images of the horrors of catastrophe. They just cannot handle it," says Reznick, author of *The Power of Your Child's Imagination: How to Transform Stress and Anxiety into Joy and Success* (Perigee/Penguin).

Children can feel especially helpless when they see images of homeless, parentless, injured, even dead Haitian children. Others buried alive. They worry the same bad stuff will happen to them – or something worse.

After all, she adds, there's been no earthquake in Haiti for 200 or 300 years, "so no where seems safe. They are afraid for their own lives and the lives of the people they love."

Children don't yet have the intellectual skills to distance themselves like adults can, says Reznick. "The more images they see, the more it's in their face, and the more people talk about it - at home and at school - it starts to overwhelm them. They don't know what to do or how to handle the enormous feelings and fears that arise."

Gruesome and disturbing images have been non-stop – "one quick flash of a news story and you can talk to your child about it with more distance and intellect. But when the photos keep coming and over time, it affects kids more."

Sign of worry, stress or fear can include stomachaches, sleeplessness, bedwetting or moodiness.

If exposure hasn't been excessive, expect kids' reactions to quiet down as the focus moves away from the crisis and their everyday lives go back to 'normal,' says Reznick, of ImageryForKids.com.

"Allow six to eight weeks after for symptoms to disappear. If after this time your child is still worried about what happened it's a sign to get some extra help," she says, adding that it might have set off older traumas that increase the impact of this latest disaster.

Minimize impact by minimizing exposure, especially for young children, Reznick strongly suggests. While teens do have the intellectual skills to make better sense of it, minimizing exposure is also in their best interests.

"As adults we have trouble integrating what is happening, and we've had many more years of experience. For a child it's nearly impossible, and for a teen it's extremely challenging as well," she adds. "For all ages it's important to allow them to talk about their feelings and what they are experiencing."

Helping kids deal with disaster

Help kids deal with the devastation with tips from Dr. Charlotte Reznick, of ImageryForKids.com:

Minimize or eliminate your child's exposure to media images.

Take care of you. You are the best role model - if you are in good shape emotionally your kids will benefit.

Learn how to use calming breathing or meditation to centre - and teach your child too.

Speak from the heart about what is happening. Answer all questions simply.

Listen to their concerns each day: "take 10, 15, or more minutes to just listen and reflect back to your child what they are feeling without fixing anything. Being heard and understood is very healing," says Reznick.

Brain storm together about how to help. "For example, starting a collection in the neighbourhood, or sending drawings and letters of support to organizations helping in Haiti - or wherever the problem area is - will decrease that helpless feeling and develop a sense of everyone can make a difference."

Trust your instincts on what to do - you have a lot of wisdom inside you. "Trust you."

Sidebar

Gruesome images impact children – and adults too.

Tragedy, crisis and terrorism can wreak havoc with people's emotional health, especially those who have experienced previous trauma.

"There is no doubt that adults also suffer emotional fallout from seeing and hearing about the earthquake - sometimes even more than their kids because they allow themselves to watch and listen more," says Dr. Charlotte Reznick.

Adults can have similar reactions to kids in terms of difficulty sleeping, being easy to anger, or having trouble focusing, adds the psychologist of ImageryForKids.com.

And "for those adults who are already suffering from PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder), watching and hearing about another catastrophe, such as the devastation in Haiti, can bring up memories of their previous trauma and exacerbate their present symptoms." They need to get help immediately.

Tone down the images, says therapist Heather McKechnie. "Visual images are far more powerful than the written word so news anchors could forewarn viewers that the graphic film footage is not suitable for children or anyone who has experienced trauma in their own lives.

"Newspapers need to be very selective where photos are placed in the paper. Do we really need to see pages and pages of the devastation to get the point? I think not."

McKechnie suggests covering other struggling areas beyond Port au Prince. "It's time to talk more about the miracles of the survivors and how strangers are coming together to help rebuild their community."

She's appalled over the scant coverage of police shooting a young girl for stealing a mirror. "That's so wrong! The buildings are rubble. If people can salvage something to start again, is it so wrong?"

Stealing food and being shot by your own police are issues that need more attention, says McKechnie. "If media spent more time offering hope for the Haitians that we hear your cry and we are coming, people would still watch or read and feel better about being part of the healing process."

Take a media break if you can, suggests Reznick. "Do something yourself to help. It's easy to text a donation, or go online. That's a first line of helping."