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Big Kid

Rescued Chilean Miners' Kids: Helping Kids After Trauma

Posted by [Sheri Reed](#) on October 13, 2010 at 10:45 PM

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Byron Avalos waits for his dad Florencio to emerge from mine.

While awaiting the first of the Chilean Miner Rescues last night, my eyes were on Byron Avalos, the 8-year old son of Florencio Avalos, the first miner to be rescued.

For awhile, Byron stood brave and stoic alongside his mother. However, in those final moments before the rescue capsule holding his father emerged and Byron could see Florencio alive and well with his own eyes, the pressure got too great, as you can imagine, and Byron burst into tears.

Everyone's talking about how the miners are going to cope, but, as the mom of an almost-eight-year-old, I kept thinking, *But how is Byron Avalos going to cope after this traumatic event? Byron and the other kids whose fathers and loved ones were rescued?*

I asked [Dr. Charlotte Reznick](#), educational psychologist and Associate Clinical Professor of Psychology at UCLA, to help explain what kids may experience during and after an emotional trauma like this one.

Byron Avalos and many other children thought their fathers, brothers, uncles, cousins, etc. were dead for more than two weeks. Then came the elation of knowing the miners were actually alive but trapped a half mile underground. It would take weeks to get them out safely. Such a powerless feeling and such a rollercoaster of emotions, especially for kids.

Dr. Charlotte Reznick explains:

Those months when the men were underground, the kids were trying to hold it together. And now even though it's the happiest, happiest moment where they're safe, it's now that they can let it out.

It's also a time where they think *Oh my God, you're alive! You could have died.* All those worries come up. Now they might feel, *Maybe it could happen again.* They might feel something could happen walking across the street. The next several weeks, the next several months, the next year, it's important to watch the kids.

It's unbelievable trauma. They're all going to suffer from post traumatic stress. All of them. It's inevitable.

Dr. Reznick explained some of the typical child crisis reactions. In the face of trauma, kids might:

- Be more active
- Be more restless
- Have difficulty concentrating
- Get upset more easily
- Be more whiny
- Cry more
- Have trouble sleeping
- Have nightmares
- Sleeping too much
- Sleeping too little
- Be really quiet
- Appear numb
- Be angry
- Be afraid
- Feel ill more often: headaches, stomach aches, etc.
- Experience fears they didn't have before
- Be in constant fear that something bad is going to happen
- Be really clingy and feel they can protect their protect their loved one if they keep them in sight.
- Do poorly in school
- Get into fights
- Become really depressed and not understand why

Of course, in an intense emotionally traumatic experience like we are seeing with this mining accident, some of their kids' reactions might not surface until well after the rescue mission. All kids are different and their emotional outcomes will be different, too.

Way to Help Kids With Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Seek Psychological Support:

Throughout the Chilean Miner Rescue effort, there has been much talk about the psychological help and support that will be made available to the miners, which is so important. It's critical that the men get the help they need but for more reasons than you might think.

Dr. Resnick explains the trickle-down of good or poor mental health:

These guys who are coming up, they have different personalities. They are going to respond differently. So based on how they respond, their families, their kids are going to respond differently. We know that if the parents are okay, kids do better. If their dads or their brothers are suffering more, they're going to suffer more.

Some of the miners might think *Gosh, if I can get through this, I can get through anything.* Another one might still be in fear or be so traumatized -- *Oh my god, I survived, but I'm terrified* -- because of the post-traumatic-stress reaction.

While good mental health support helps relieve the stress that trickles down to family members, it's pertinent that all family members closely involved have support as well. For these kids, it might be one-on-one or family counseling, or it might be organizing psychological groups so the kids of the miners can get together and talk.

Imagine a Happy Future:

In a trauma situation where kids feel powerless and incapable of making a difference, ask them to imagine the future they want and help them come up with small but real ways how they can help work toward that future.

One way kids can feel better when they feel powerless, Reznick suggests, is to help others.

It could be something like raise some money, even just a little bit, so that the miners can have better safety. Donating lunch money, having a lemonade stand ... Having some control of making things better in the future for other miners, for their families who might have to go back down when they return to work.

For people in the armed forces overseas in Afghanistan or Iran, similar things happen. You have a dad or a brother over in Afghanistan and every day you're wondering *Are they okay?* That is continual stress. So those kids might send Halloween candy to the troops. This makes kids feel like they're doing something and that really helps. It gives that sense of: *I can do something. I feel a little bit more in control. I can contribute.* Kids feel good when they can help people.

Talk About the Cycle of Life:

Experiences of grief and trauma do provide an opportunity to talk about the cycle of life. In America, we're not big on talking about death, but everyone's going to have to face death someday. Take these times to help explain about life and death to your kids.

Teach Kids to Make Connections:

Knowing our memories and our loved ones are always in our hearts can be very reassuring to many of us. This kind of connection can be a helpful way to deal with death, but it can also help children like those in Chile cope when they must be separated from their loved ones again.

The kids of the miners are going to return to school and be away from their fathers again, which might prove difficult for them. Dr. Reznick suggests parents encourage their kids to use their minds to "imagine sending love from their heart to their dad's heart and dad sending love back." If dad and child can collaborate on such a connection, even better.

Turn to Faith:

If your family is one of faith, sharing your faith in god and teaching kids the benefits of prayer might help. Many of the miners have said it was their faith that got them through.

Reassure Them:

In times of trauma, kids really need their parents' reassurance. A lot of reassurance that they are safe.

Parents might have to really reassure their kids over and over again and answer all their questions over and over again. When you're stressed like that, that part of your brain that's dealing with the stress shuts down that logical frontal lobe part, that thinking part. You have to hear things over again and be reassured over again. Kids need to hear: *We're okay, we'll get through this. Even if something happens, we'll figure out a way.*

One Thing We Can We Do Here in America

Our kids here in America can send letters to the kids in Chile. You can go to [Google Translate](#) and write in English and then translate it into Spanish. "Send letters, send cards. They will appreciate it. Knowing that we're thinking of them, that the kids here are thinking of them, that's going to make a difference in their life. Helping them feel they're not alone."

While Dr. Reznick shares many ideas for helping kids through the stages of PTSD, she stresses the importance of taking time. For these Chilean children, it's all about reunification now. "Right now, the kids just need to be with their dads, brothers, or uncles."

"A lot more tears are going to flow from the families and the kids because now that they're all safely home, everyone can just let it out."

Have you been worrying about the miners' kids during this incredible event?

Image via [Rescate Mineros/Flickr](#)

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