

## **Natural Disasters: Helping Your Kids Cope with Overwhelming Tragedy**

*By Jim Burns, Ph.D.*

I don't know anyone who isn't moved by the tragedies we observe following natural disasters. Not long ago, over 150,000 people died in the aftermath of the 12/26/04 Asian tsunami. More recently, Hurricane Katrina wreaked devastation upon much of America's gulf coast. With ongoing media coverage, most Americans have seen the many pictures and videos of the devastation, of victims and survivors - and I, for one, have felt overwhelmed by the magnitude of these tragedies. As a parent, I wonder how our children cope with these catastrophes?

In this information age - and with all of the media coverage, it's likely that only the youngest of children are sheltered from seeing or hearing information following natural disasters. Parents can play a vital role in helping their kids cope with the overwhelming tragedy associated with these crises. To help you help your kids, I've put together some ideas that you might find helpful.

### **1. Be willing to discuss natural disasters with your kids.**

Helping your kids cope with the natural disasters starts with being willing to talk about the tragedy with them. Children, particularly younger ones, can be scared by tragedies, wondering if something similar could happen to them. Ask them whether or not they have been thinking about the crisis. Find out if the news of the disaster has made them afraid. Talk with them, in an age-appropriate way, about what has happened and help to answer their questions and calm their fears.

### **2. Tell them the truth.**

Honesty is the best policy - now as always. Still, honesty doesn't mean that you need to share every gruesome detail of the devastation with your kids. Young children can be frightened by such cold, hard facts, so be sure to be age-appropriate when talking to your kids about this disaster.

### **3. Shelter your kids from graphic video and pictures.**

In our "24/7 live" news coverage from around the world, be aware that the graphic, often disturbing video and pictures we've been seeing - don't have to be part of conveying the "news" of what's happening - to your children. My advice is that when natural disasters strike - especially in the immediate aftermath - keep the television news programs off when your kids are around.

### **4. Reassure your kids - as best you can.**

Since we don't have control over natural disasters like tsunamis, hurricanes or other natural disasters that our own regions might be vulnerable to, as parents, we shouldn't promise a child that we will protect them from any harm that a catastrophe may bring. Our job here is to reassure them as best we can. If kids are worried about something bad like a tsunami occurring, we can tell them how unlikely it is to happen. And, of course, we can tell them, "Mom and dad will do everything we can to always make sure you are safe from harm."

### **5. Don't ignore the spiritual issues.**

If you've ever wondered about what your kids think about God or faith in Christ, you'll probably find out in the wake of a disaster. Be prepared for questions about God and life (like "Why did God let so many people die?") that you may never had heard from your child before. Kids really do want to talk about theological issues. Sometimes it takes a crisis to bring those questions to the forefront. Be ready. Don't be surprised. And, if you don't have all of the answers, that's okay. Work to help your kids (and maybe even yourself!) search for the answers.

#### **6. Look for signs of "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" in your kids.**

It's not uncommon for kids to suffer in varying degrees from "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" (PTSD) after such large tragedies. Changes in your child's behavior such as regressing to more childlike behavior, acting out, withdrawal, difficulty sleeping, nightmares, fear of a specific disaster may all be signs that your child is suffering from PTSD. If these symptoms don't resolve themselves, seeking the help of a professional Christian counselor would be a good next step.

#### **7. Pray for those whose lives have been impacted by the disaster.**

If your family doesn't have a regular family prayer time, I would encourage you to start one. Focus on praying for all those whose lives have been impacted by the tragedy. Praying as a family for these people also reinforces with your kids your own belief in God's love and His power to care and heal those who have been hurt.

#### **8. Give.**

As a family, find a way to give something - anything - to help people in need. Giving to those in need is a spiritual response. The call to Christ is the call to serve. Giving helps your kids learn to cope with tragedy by serving and helping those in need. Giving gives them some tangible way to respond. Your giving does not have to be limited to money. Typically, following a natural disaster, all kinds of supplies and food are needed to help the victims. Check out your local newspaper for organizations that might be taking donations of all kinds to help provide relief.

For financial donations, I believe that Samaritan's Purse and World Vision are both trustworthy organizations that help provide relief assistance to victims of natural disasters. Here are the links to their websites:

Samaritan's Purse

[www.samaritanspurse.org](http://www.samaritanspurse.org)

World Vision

[www.worldvision.com](http://www.worldvision.com)