

Supporting Children When Scary Things Happen

Jo-An Vargo
Head of Primary School

As parents and teachers, we understand the importance of creating a safe nurturing environment for young children. It helps them feel secure, trust others, take appropriate risks and develop emotional resiliency. However, there are times when the world is a scary place. Photographs, news stories and television updates of natural disasters like the recent earthquake in Haiti bring injury, loss and devastation into our homes – sometimes on a daily basis. These events may stir up questions and concerns about the cause and effects of the event itself, but they may also elicit questions and concerns about a child's own safety or their family. The Southern Early Childhood Association recently compiled a series of helpful suggestions that we, as parents and teachers, can use to support our children. I wanted to pass them along to our community.

Answer all of their questions. Children fear what they do not understand, so simply explaining what has happened is the first step in lessening their fears.

- Make sure you explain things in a calm manner and in terms the child can easily understand.
- Let them know that their questions and concerns are valid and important to you.
- Keep the child's developmental age in mind when talking about the disaster. Too much detail may frighten a very young child, while school age children may actually benefit from more detailed descriptions.
- Be honest in your answers. Children will ultimately discover the truth and may come to distrust your reassurances in the future if you are not up front with them.
- Children may assume that the disaster has occurred close to their home and fear for their own safety and the safety of their loved ones. Make sure they realize that they are safe; use a map or a globe if you think the child will understand. (Note: HH begins introducing our PreS 3's students to the globe as well as Oklahoma's location when we study China. Every PS grade thereafter incorporates the globe when appropriate for a unit of study.)

Limit media exposure. The extensive media coverage of a disaster is intended for an adult audience and may not be suitable for young children.

- Do your best to shield them from graphic images. Photos of destruction, injury and even death are commonplace in media coverage. Remember that for a young child, the image of a destroyed home is frightening enough.
- When it's appropriate to do so, watch news stories and commentaries with your children so that you can provide the explanations and reassurances they need to feel safe.

Maintain daily routines. We all recognize that the stability and predictability of a routine is very important to children.

- Maintaining a familiar schedule is comforting, especially when a child has just seen how unpredictable the world can be at times.
- Give lots of hugs; physical comforting provides a feeling of safety.
- Make sure children are getting adequate sleep, exercise and nutrition. Anxiety can take a toll on the body, so pay attention to both their emotional and physical well-being.

Get involved. Children may want to help those affected by the disaster.

- Knowing that they can team up with people all over the world to help those in need can be both comforting and empowering for children.
- Contact a local or national organization to see how children can help. There are many ways they can contribute to relief efforts.