

# DEALING WITH DISASTER

The recent events in The Indian Ocean have resulted in unprecedented news coverage of a major disaster. Every night we are witness to the unbelievable suffering and tragedy that the tsunami has brought about to countless families in that part of the world.

Our students and children are also witness to this tragedy. As adults we have trouble processing all that we hear and see. For our students and children, the impact is even greater. They are exposed to these events with little experience in dealing with tragedy or even in understanding how these events could have happened. They are frightened and worried that they too could be confronted with an event like this.

There are several things that we as parents and teachers can do to help. First acknowledge that bad things have happened. Children need to know that you are being truthful with them. They know from the words they hear on TV or in the newspaper or the discussions you have that something has happened. Not telling them the truth reduces their trust of everything else that you tell them.

The youngest children may not understand that anything has happened. It is not necessary to tell these children unless they ask. For all older children the first concern is their and your safety. You need to tell them that both you and they are safe. Be open and truthful in describing the events but depending on their age choose what you tell them.

Age is an important factor in how you deal with the child's concerns and anxiety. For grade school children, be open and honest but try to answer their questions in as simple and direct a manner as possible. Don't pretend that nothing has happened. They hear more than you might believe and worry about many things. Do try to monitor what they see and hear. Listen to their concerns and try to reassure them. Be honest and don't pretend to have all the answers. A simple 'I don't know' is enough.

For older children, encourage them to talk to you about their understanding of the events and how they feel about them. They will often want to do something to try to have a better feeling of control. The events may be overwhelming to them and they want to have a better feeling of their place in the course of events. This is a perfect time to talk about how they can perform volunteer service or fund raising. Point out that although the event was tragic, people are working together to overcome the problems.

If your child seems to be over reacting to the event or is showing continued signs of fear and anxiety about the events, make certain that you acknowledge that his/her fears are real and should be dealt with in a timely fashion. For many children, a talk with a school counselor or other professional is necessary.