

Bible Storying for Kids

www.CBS4Kids.org

M. Kurt Jarvis, Director

2398 Lakewood, Saratoga Springs, UT 84045

1-801-653-0262

Email: kurt@CBS4Kids.org

Helping Children Cope with Disaster

M. Kurt Jarvis

When global tragedy happens it is not uncommon for Christians to wonder why God allows such things to occur. Children often have the same question. The Bible, God's Word, can help give us understanding of these situations.

In Luke 13:1-5 we read an account where this very issue of tragedy is discussed. This account is of a time when Pilate had murdered many from Galilee and had used their blood in pagan sacrifices. Jesus answered the questions asked by many if this was God's punishment by posing a question Himself. He asked those around him "Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered these things? ... Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them, do you think they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?"

Here are two examples of tragedies, one that was the direct action of a person (Pilate). The other tragedy might have been from a natural disaster such as an earthquake or negligence by those who constructed the tower. In both incidences people died. Jesus clarified that it was wrong to think that these people died because they were worse sinners than others. Jesus also said that when these things happen it should be a wake up call to everyone to consider their own relationship with God.

If we think global disasters are God's judgment on people we are going against the very words of Jesus. Earthquakes happen because this is the way the earth was created; they are part of nature and what makes life. Scripture does not support that they are events triggered by God against certain nations or people. It is part of nature, part of life and part of death. Jesus calmed the storm when he was in the boat with His disciples but Jesus did not end storms forever. Storms, earthquakes and tsunamis are all part of nature.

The real question is how we respond to God and others when such tragedies happen. These tragedies are not much different than when a family member dies or becomes terminally ill. It is the same pain only in global disasters multiplied many thousands of times. In these difficult times we are reminded that God loves and cares for each of us. While thousands might be swept into eternity when a disaster happens, those who know God and have their faith and trust in God are also swept into the very presence of God. For those that know Christ, the scriptures remind us to be gone from our earthly bodies is to be immediately present with God.

When tragedy happens. Jesus is there with the victims and there with those who minister to the victims. Jesus understands the pain they are going through because he went through physical pain as well. He is there to help and comfort and God also gives us the responsibility to respond and give help and comfort too.

When tragedy happens this is our opportunity to renew our faith and be reminded that when we reach out to others that are in need, we are being followers of Jesus. It was Jesus who told us when we help those who are suffering it is the same as helping him. Matthew 25:31-40

This is where we can teach children and youth to understand the biblical principles of faith hope and love in the midst of global tragedy; Faith, that God is in control and God cares for every victim. Hope in knowing that there is place of peace for all who know Christ as Savior, and the Love that we can show in practical ways through responding to help victims and countries, especially in times of disaster.

Global disasters, like massive earthquakes, tsunamis or storms, can have a strong emotional effect on people around the world. The scale of the physical devastation and the loss of life in large disasters are disturbing even for those not directly affected by the event. Like adults, many children and youth try to comprehend the scope of such tragedy and understand how it relates to them. Common reactions include sadness and the strong desire to help.

Although most children will be fine in dealing with news of global disasters once the media coverage lessens, some may need additional support from adults because of their personal circumstances, in particular those who come from or may have lost loved ones in the affected areas. Extended family is extremely important in many cultures and many immigrants have strong ties to family back home. Adults can help children by supporting their emotional, spiritual and psychological needs, helping them to understand the events factually, and providing the opportunity to process their reactions,

Global disaster may strike quickly and without warning. These events can be frightening for adults, but they are traumatic for children. Children may become overly anxious, confused or frightened as they hear adults and older youth around them talk about catastrophic events. As a parent, teacher or other children's worker, we need to cope with the disaster in a way that will help children avoid developing a permanent sense of confusion. It is important to give children guidance that will help them reduce their fears and anxieties. Ultimately, the children's worker in partnership with the parents can determine how best to guide children during such catastrophic global occurrences.

Reactions to disasters may appear immediately after the disaster or after several days, weeks or much longer. Most of the time the symptoms will pass after the child readjusts emotionally, spiritually and sometimes even physically to tragic world events.

When any disaster occurs and such disasters are widely covered by the media, it is important to recognize normal reactions of children to the event. Reactions of children are generally age related and specific. The following is an overview of normal reactions within determined age groups and helpful hints for enabling children to cope with disaster-precipitated stress.

How Children Might React

Preschool

When children this age are exposed to catastrophic disaster information they may not fully understand the gravity of distant situations, especially when the tragedy is not personal or with people groups outside their normal sphere. However when preschool children are exposed to such disaster media coverage they may emotionally and physically react. Children this age have great difficulty separating what is real from fantasy.

In hearing adults and others talk about disaster and as the adults and children around them discuss such events and react, children often feel helpless and might experience a sense of fear and insecurity.

Many children lack the verbal skills and conceptual skills needed to cope effectively with sudden stress brought on by such disasters. The reactions of their parents and families often strongly affect them.

Typical Reactions to Tragedy:

- Fear of the darkness or animals
- Clinging to parents

- Unexplained crying
- Fear of being left alone
- Confusion
- Significant reaction if the child has recently lost a loved one, particularly a parent or sibling

Helpful Hints:

- Be sensitive and aware of play reenactment to tragedy they might have been exposed to via media
- Keep children this age from being exposed to media coverage
- Be careful around young children discussing global disasters with others
- Provide verbal reassurance and physical comforting
- Give frequent attention
- Provide comforting bedtime routines

School Age (5-11 years)

The school-age child is able to understand permanent changes or losses others might be experiencing. Imaginary fears that seem unrelated to the disaster may appear. Some children, however, become preoccupied with the details of the disaster and want to talk about it continuously. This can get in the way of other life activities.

Typical responses:

- Clinging
- Competition with younger siblings for parental attention
- Nightmares, fear of darkness
- Withdrawal from peers
- Loss of interest and poor concentration in school
- Headaches or other physical complaints
- Depression
- Fears about their own safety
- Significant reaction if the child has recently lost a loved one, particularly a parent or sibling

Helpful Hints:

- Open and frank discussions with adults and peers
- Opportunities for structures but not demanding responsibilities at home
- Adult encouragement for practical ways children can help or raise funds to assist disaster victims.

Preadolescence (11-14 years)

Peer reactions are especially significant in this age group as children this age are more aware of the realities of disasters. Children this age need to know that his/ her fears are both appropriate and shared by others. Helping should be aimed at providing ways for children this age to respond to the disaster others are experiencing.

Typical Responses:

- Appetite disturbance

- School distractions with daily schoolwork or homework as children this age become consumed by the disaster media coverage and information. Physical problems (e.g., headaches, vague pains, skin eruptions, bowel problems, psychosomatic complaints)
- Significant reaction if the child has recently lost a loved one, particularly a parent or sibling

Helpful Hints:

- Group activities geared toward helping victims of disasters
- Involvement with same age group activity
- Group discussions geared toward disaster related issues.
- Be ready to discuss Biblical and spiritual perspectives and issues related to tragedies.

Adolescence (14-18 years)

A disaster may stimulate fears concerning disasters that could personally affect them. As children get older, their responses begin to resemble adult reactions to disaster. Teens may also have a combination of some more childlike reactions mixed with adult responses. Teens may feel overwhelmed by their emotions, and may be unable to discuss them with their families.

Typical Responses:

- Distraction and lack of attention to daily tasks of school work, home work and home responsibilities
- Excessive attention to media coverage of the disaster.
- Withdrawal and isolation
- Agitation or decrease in energy level
- Indifference

Helpful Hints:

- Encourage participation in community projects and efforts for disaster relief
- Encourage discussion of disaster experiences with peers, family, and significant others
- Encourage but do not insist upon discussion of disaster fears within the family, church or school setting
- Be ready to discuss Biblical and spiritual perspectives and issues related to tragedies.

Hints for counseling children:

Talk to your children and students. At home or in class, take the time to discuss events factually. Use a map or globe and provide relevant information about seismology, geography, cultural issues, emergency and public health services, etc. Allow children to discuss their feelings and concerns and encourage questions. Even children who do not know anyone hurt may experience a sense of loss or grief, may feel at risk themselves, or be concerned that such major disaster can happen with little to no warning. Acknowledge and normalize their feelings. A caring listener is important. Let them know that others share their feelings and that their reactions are common and expected.

Be a good listener and observer. Let children guide you as to how concerned they are or how much information they need. If they are not focused on the tragedy, don't dwell on it. But be available to answer their questions to the best of your ability. Young children may not be able to express themselves verbally. Pay attention to changes in their behavior or social interactions. Most school age children and adolescents can discuss their thoughts and feelings although they may need you to provide an "opening" to start a conversation.

Highlight people's compassion and humanity. Large-scale tragedies often generate a tremendous outpouring of caring and support from around the world. Focus on the aid being provided by

governments, non-profit aid agencies, and individual donors. Discuss processes of getting aid to the most impacted areas and the cooperation between leaders and people of so many nations.

Do something positive with your children or students to help others in need. Taking action is one of the most powerful ways to help children feel more in control and to build a stronger sense of connection. Suggestions include making individual donations to international disaster relief organizations, holding a church, school or community fundraiser, or even working to support families impacted by the tragedy.

Emphasize people's resiliency. Help children understand the ability of people to come through a tragic event and go on with their lives. Focus on children's own competencies in terms of their daily life and in difficult times. In age appropriate terms, identify other disasters from which communities or countries have recovered.

Be honest. Acknowledge your feelings about the event. Be sure your comments are age appropriate but even young children will feel more reassured and closer to you if you are honest. For older children in particular, it is okay to admit that you feel sad, perhaps a little helpless that you cannot do more to make a difference, or even awed at the sheer power and violence of nature. Balance statements of concern with information about our emergency preparedness and response systems here at home.

Monitor the news. It is important to stay informed, but exposure to endless news may not be helpful. Images of the disaster itself and the resulting human suffering from injury, hunger and disease can become overwhelming. Young children in particular cannot distinguish between images on T.V. and their personal reality. Older children may choose to watch the news, but be available to discuss what they see and help put it into perspective. They may also prefer to ignore the news and watch music videos. This is okay.

Spend family time. Being with family and friends is always important in difficult or sad times. Even if your children are not significantly impacted by this tragedy, this may be a good opportunity to more consciously participate in and appreciate family life. Doing things together, even working on disaster relief projects together as a family or church, can reinforce children's sense of stability and connectedness.

Kurt Jarvis served for over 35 years in public education as a school social worker and as many years in children's ministry leadership. He currently is the Director of CBS4Kids.org, an international children's leadership training ministry and is on the Board of Directors of The International Network of Children's Ministry, www.incm.org

Resources

Handouts drawn from some of the above information can be accessed at http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/index.aspx .

There are many organizations and agencies with helpful information about helping children and families cope with natural disasters and other crises. There are also numerous ways to donate to international relief agencies online.

The Salvation Army <http://www.thesalvationarmyusa.org>

World Vision <http://www.worldvision.org>

American Red Cross <http://www.redcross.org>

Child Evangelism Fellowship, www.cefonline.com