



# How Parents Can Help their Children Cope After a Disaster

Children may respond to a disaster, such as the recent earthquake, in many different ways. Children are very sensitive and struggle to make sense of these events. They may find it hard to recover from frightening experiences. They will look to adults' reactions as a signal to how serious the situation is. Parents can provide this support.

## What are common reactions for any age children?

- Sleep disturbances and nightmares
- Feeling hypervigilant or always on guard
- Worries about the safety of self, family, friends or pets
- Increased sensitivity to sounds (sirens, loud noises, things falling or crashing)
- Fears that another earthquake or aftershock will occur
- Decreased concentration and attention
- Withdrawal from friends, activities and social situations
- Becoming irritated and disruptive
- Physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches, aches and pains)
- Strong reactions to reminders of the earthquake (destroyed buildings, news reports)
- Grief and loss
- Lack of interest in usual activities

## Preschool Age Children (1-5) may additionally experience:

- Regressing to younger behaviors such as thumb sucking, bedwetting, fear of the dark
- New fears such as strangers, the dark, animals or "monsters"
- Re-experiencing the earthquake through play
- Crying or clinging more than usual
- Moving around aimlessly or becoming immobile

## Early Childhood Age (6-11) may additionally experience:

- Withdrawing from friends and social activities
- Difficulty concentrating
- Developing unfounded fears
- Decline in school performance
- Feeling they may be responsible
- Feeling numb

## Adolescents (12-17) may additionally experience:

- Flashbacks (feeling like the disaster is being re-experienced)
- Decline in school performance
- High risk behavior like drinking, using drugs, or doing things that are harmful to oneself or others
- Feelings of guilt for not preventing injury or death
- Depression and/or suicidal thoughts

# How Can You Help Your Children?

**Model a healthy response** Children will take cues from their parents and caretakers. Maintain a calm and emotionally appropriate response. Displaying excessive concern may reinforce your child's anxiety.

**Spend time listening** Allow children to ask questions and express their concerns. Do not argue with the way they feel.

**Answer questions briefly and honestly** Explanations should be age-appropriate and not too detailed. It is okay to admit if you do not have the answers to all their questions.

**Limit news exposure** Protect your child from too much media coverage.

**Help children feel safe** Tell children what to do during an aftershock and explain how you are keeping the family safe. This may need to be repeated many times.

**Maintain rules and routines** Children feel more safe and secure with structure and routine. If it is difficult to maintain old routines, create new ones.

**Monitor adult conversations** Be aware of what is being said during adult conversations. Children may misinterpret what they hear and can be frightened unnecessarily.

**Calm worries about friends' safety** Friendships may be disrupted by the earthquake with school closures and travel.

**Encourage children to help** Children recover and cope better when they feel they are helping. Find ways your children can help, such as food drives or family activities.

**Be patient** Children may be needy and distracted. Reminders and extra attention help.

**Give support at bedtime** Try to spend more time with your children at bedtime with such activities as telling a story. They may need to sleep close by temporarily.

**Stay hopeful** Even in the most difficult situations, try to stay hopeful for the future. A positive and optimistic outlook helps children see the good things in the world around them.

If your child or family member still has trouble coping, please ask for help. You can consult a mental health professional, your human resources department or company Employee Assistance Program. The following is a list of helpful resources.

## Helpful Resources

- TELL Life Line 03 5774-0992
- TELL Counseling 03 4550-1146 for English & 03 4550-1147 for Japanese
- TELL Website - <http://www.telljp.com/> how to cope following and disaster and stress management techniques
- TELL Wiki - <http://www.bluejava.com/tell/index.html> - English resources in Japan
- Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Violence and Disasters: What Parents Can Do [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)
- Parent Guidelines for Helping Children After an Earthquake [http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn\\_assets/pdfs/Parents\\_Talk\\_to\\_Children\\_about\\_Earthquake.pdf](http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/Parents_Talk_to_Children_about_Earthquake.pdf)
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network [www.NCTSN.org](http://www.NCTSN.org)

