Ten Tips on How to Help Kids Cope with Disaster

1. **Turn off the TV.** Watching television reports on disasters may overwhelm younger children. They may not understand that the tape of an event is being replayed, and instead think the disaster is happening over and over again. Overexposure to coverage of the events affects teenagers and adults as well. Television limits should be set for both you and your children.

2. **Listen to your children carefully.** Before responding, get a clear picture of what it is that they understand and what is leading to their questions. Emotional stress results in part when a child cannot give meaning to dangerous experiences. Find out what he or she understands about what has happened. Their knowledge will be determined by their age and their previous exposure to such events. Begin a dialog to help them gain a basic understanding that is appropriate for their age and responds to their underlying concerns.

3. **Give children reassurance and psychological first-aid.** Assure them about all that is being done to protect children who have been directly affected by this crisis. Take this opportunity to let them know that if any emergency or crisis should occur, your primary concern will be their safety. Make sure they know they are being protected.

4. **Consider getting professional help.** For children directly affected by this crisis—such as children who have lost a loved one overseas—parents should consider counseling, not just for the child, but also for the entire family. Other children may also be affected by the images they see and stories they hear. Parents should be alert to any significant changes in sleeping patterns, eating habits, concentration, wide emotional swings or frequent physical complaints without apparent illness. If present, these will likely subside within a short time. If prolonged, however, we encourage you to seek psychological support and counseling.

5. **Expect the unexpected.** Not every child will experience these events in the same way. As children develop, their intellectual, physical and emotional capacities change. Younger children will depend largely on their parents to interpret events, while older children and teenagers will get information from a variety of sources which may not be as reliable. Understand that older teenagers, because of their greater capacity for understanding, may be more affected by these stories. While teenagers seem to have more adult capacities to recover as well, they still need extra love, understanding and support to process these events.

6. **Give your children extra time and attention.** They need your close, personal involvement to comprehend that they are safe and secure. Talk, play and, most important, listen to them. Find time to engage in special activities for children of all ages. Read bedtime stories and sing songs to help younger children fall asleep.

7. **Be a model for your child.** Your child will learn how to deal with these events by seeing how you deal with them. Base the amount of self-disclosure on the age and developmental level of each of your children. Explain your feelings but remember to do so calmly.
8. **Watch your own behavior.** Make a point of showing sensitivity toward the different countries affected by the disaster. This is an opportunity to teach your children that we are all part of one world and that we all need to help each other.

9. **Help your children return to normal activities.** Children almost always benefit from activity, goal orientation and sociability. Ensure that your child's school environment is also returning to normal patterns and not spending great amounts of time discussing the crisis.

10. **Encourage your child to do volunteer work.** Helping others can give your child a sense of control, security and empathy. Indeed, in the midst of crisis, adolescents and youth can emerge as active agents of positive change. Encourage your children to help support local charities that assist children in need.