

Children and their response to disasters
Information for teachers and parents following the tsunami

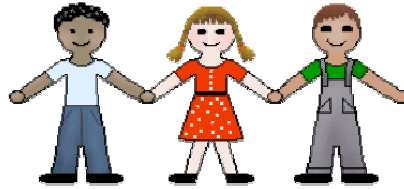


Australian Government

Attorney-General's Department
Emergency Management Australia

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There is a wide range of physiological and emotional reactions children may display following a traumatic event.

Some of the common reactions that children display include:

- ❖ Generalised fear, frightened by many things
- ❖ Heightened arousal, often seen as being jumpy and unable to settle
- ❖ Confusion, difficulty in paying attention and remembering things in the short term
- ❖ Difficulty talking about the event or wanting to talk about it all the time
- ❖ Sleep disturbances and nightmares
- ❖ Separation fears and clinging to caregivers
- ❖ Anxieties about death
- ❖ Somatic symptoms (e.g., stomach aches, headaches)
- ❖ Enacting the experience in play and story telling

After a disaster children are often anxious and fearful that the disaster will happen again, that they will be separated from their family and those they know and trust. The media has highlighted those children who have been orphaned or separated from their parents in the recent Indian Ocean tsunami; this may heighten anxiety in children generally.

School personnel and parents are in the best position to reassure children and re-empower their sense of safety after seeing the pictures of the tsunami and hearing the stories.

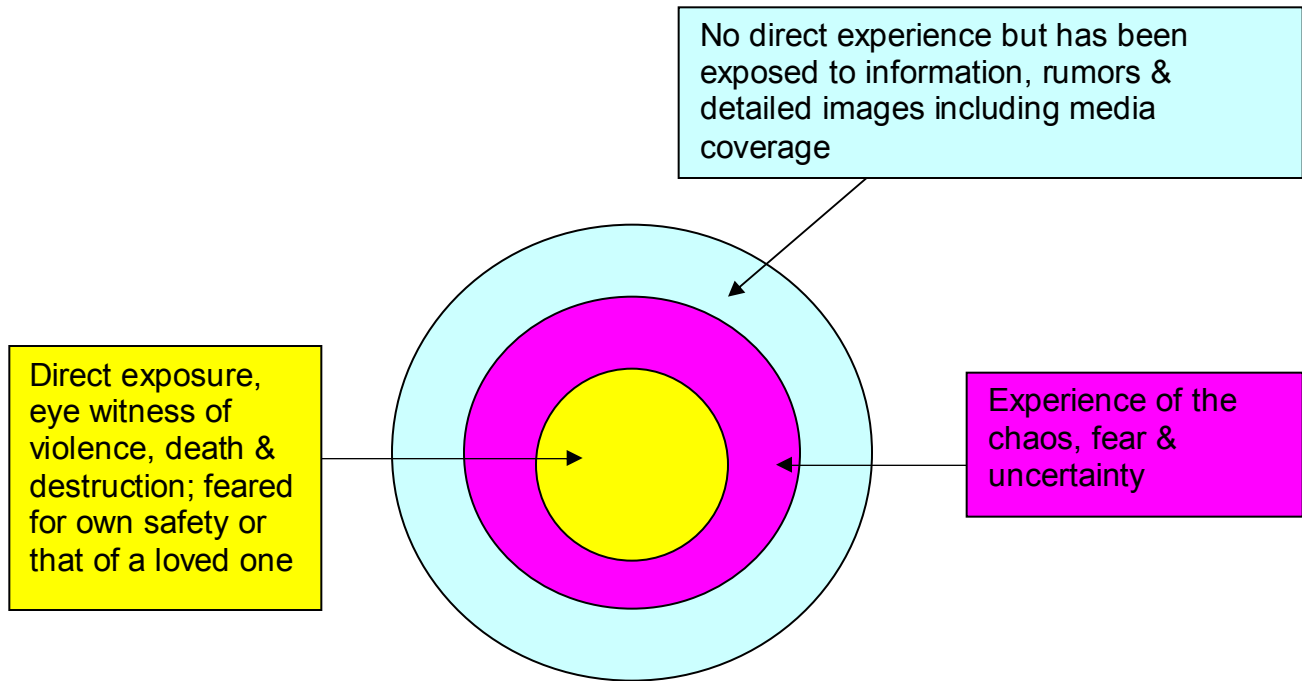
The tsunami have been referred to by many different names in the media, including 'the Indian Ocean tsunami, 'the South Asia Tsunami and tidal waves'. It is important that children realise that these are not several separate events but rather different names for the same events.

Some children will be directly affected, having either been at the scene of the tsunami or near by or having lost loved ones. In some schools teachers and students have been killed by the tsunami or remain missing.

Psychologists have identified that those who are in closest physical proximity to the event OR in closest emotional proximity to the victims or the experience are most at risk of psychological distress.

Staff and students should be assessed for impact and need for specialist counselling and support. This can be done by considering the following:

Physical proximity



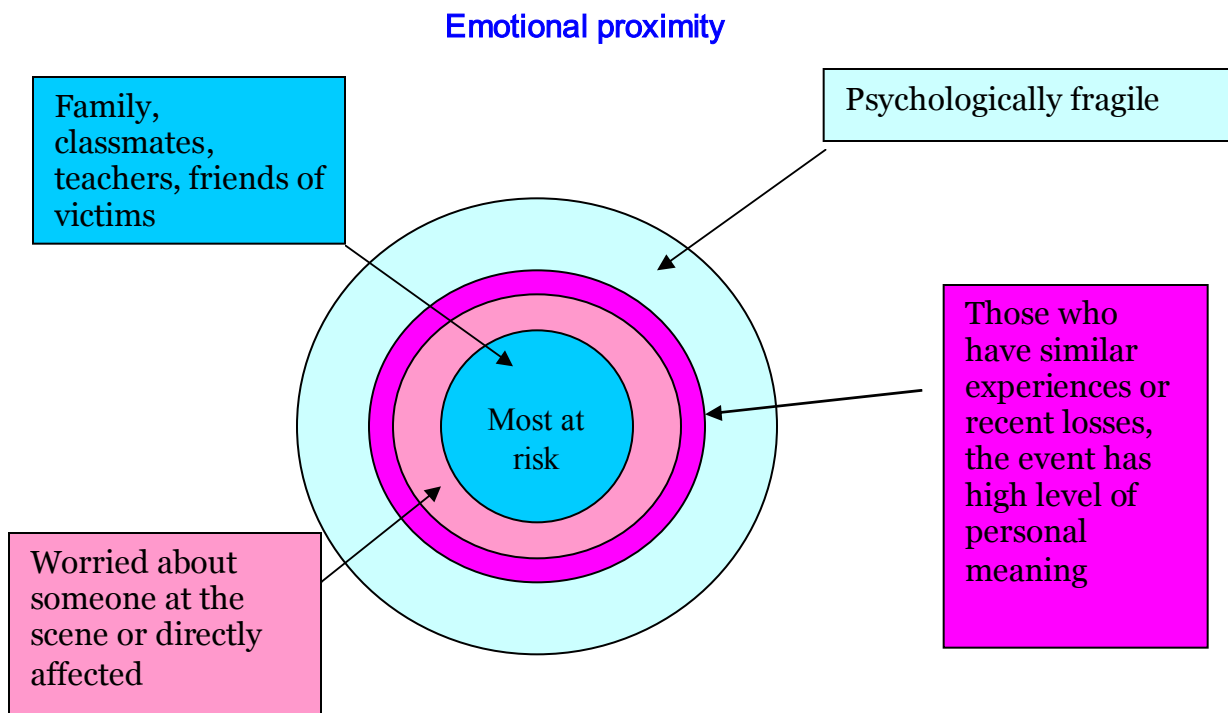
Staff and students can be identified as being likely to need emotional support by considering the nature of their experience of the event. Only a few people are likely to need professional counselling, but many will need care, compassion and support. Identify those who were at the site of the tsunami or have lost friends and loved ones through the tsunami. They will probably need to see a counsellor experienced in trauma and disaster counselling. Those who were at the scene, but not caught in the tsunami or near the water surge at the time, will also be affected by their experiences of near death and the sights to which they have been exposed since the tsunami hit.

There will be some who were in the country at the time but who didn't witness any of the destruction, yet have been exposed to stories and images that have been shocking and distressing. It isn't necessary to be physically present at such an event to feel distressed and traumatised.

Children can often imagine the horrors and in the absence of real information, they may imagine the worst possible scenarios. Children's fears may stem from their imaginations. These fears and anxieties should be taken seriously.

A child who feels afraid is afraid.

Psychological proximity to the event is another risk factor identified by psychologists experienced in disaster mental health.



Emotional Proximity

This risk assessment includes those who are related to someone who has been listed as missing, who has died, or who has had a similar experience of threat. Being worried about a person can be just as debilitating as being involved in the event. For those schools that have lost students, staff or members of the school community, a network of support will need to be developed.



The Age, 6th of January 2005

What you can do to help students and colleagues who are affected:

Most reactions to traumatic events are normal and will usually subside within a few days. Psychologists and mental health workers who counsel those affected by disasters have found that in the initial period it is helpful to provide routine, predictability and reassurance. The teachers of the children in the article above are quoted as saying that attending school has given the affected children “a sense of community as well as an opportunity to assess how many children had been affected”. Students may want to know and understand what a tsunami is. This is a common reaction to trying to understand a threat.

Information on the [EMA School Education web site](#) on should help teachers to answer such questions.

Most helpful for an affected person is for others to acknowledge the experience they have had, listen and provide soothing and comforting.

Psychological First Aid

Psychological first aid is a strategy used after disasters to help people return to their normal coping levels.

Caring	Containment
Connection	Communication
Comfort	Concern

These supports are known to add to an individual's ability to manage very stressful events and are similar to the resilience building behaviours we promote in schools already.

The key tasks for the affected person in the early stages after a disaster are to cope and adjust to the crisis and to develop skills to cope with the future. Seeing a future can be difficult when what has just happened is overwhelming.

Noticing children who are affected by the tsunami and other disturbing events

When children are grieving, it is important to know that they are **not** constantly sad. They may seem happy and at play for some of the time, this does not mean that they are over the event or not upset about it.

Children may cry and be very sad or they may play games that are about the disaster or themes of threat. Sometimes children who are disturbed by what they have seen and heard are quiet and withdrawn, not wanting to or unable to put into words the fears that they hold.

If you notice a child behaving in an unusual way, take the time to ask if something is bothering them. Be careful to listen to what and how they answer; a worry may be something communicated through behaviour rather than words.

Teachers may see children drawing pictures of tsunami or of other disturbing events; this is your first opportunity to speak one on one with the child about what is bothering them.

What can we do?

Sometimes we can't make things just go away. Most people have ways of coping when the unexpected happens. If we explore and understand a problem this helps us to become stronger. Sharing strategies for coping is one way of building emotional strength.

Talking to people we trust about our problem gives us the opportunity to work out how we can develop ways to cope.

For those students and staff who have not been directly affected but who are moved by the devastation, it is important to not feel powerless to 'make a difference'. Already Australians have been donating money to assist in the recovery programs underway. School fund raising and programs to sponsor others in affected countries will continue to help Australians to recover from the distress of the events.

Australian schools could 'adopt a tsunami affected school', developing a sister school relationship. During the initial crisis schools and communities will be assisted by the various aid agencies, but after a period of time these agencies will need to withdraw. Schools will then need ongoing support and perhaps even the type of emotional and physical support of which only other educators are aware.

For students who are now frightened about their own safety, it is important that school staff and parents talk with children about their own emergency

management plans. Knowing that there are strategies to keep children safe if something happens takes away the sense of unpredictability and fear.

Emergency Management Australia has information on its web site for home emergency planning and school emergency management planning.

If you have concerns about any child contact the Centrelink Tsunami hotline. The number is: 1800 057 111

Acknowledgements

The Age, Fairfax Publishing

Jane's School Safety Handbook, Jane's Information Group. USA