

Guiding principles for school based
response following disasters



Australian Government

Attorney-General's Department
Emergency Management Australia

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The tsunami that recently devastated communities in neighbouring countries and resulted in such an overwhelming disaster may be on the minds of staff and students when the new school year begins. There are some basic principles for assisting people to recognise the event and to manage the feelings that may be aroused by the information and media coverage.

Some of you may be in the difficult situation of having lost staff, students or members of your school community. Sadly some of you may have directly experienced the tsunami yourself or lost a loved one.

Identify those affected

In some States and Territories, Department of Education officials have begun to identify which schools may have had members of their community travelling in the affected countries at the time and those that have members missing, injured, or dead. It will be some time before all the missing and deceased are identified. It is important to understand the impact of the event on your community.

If you know that some members of your school community have suffered losses or been exposed to the devastation of the tsunami you will need to weigh the impact of making public statements about the tsunami against distressing these people further. If you intend to speak publicly about a death within the school community it is always wise to let the affected family know, they may have a view about how they want the deceased spoken about. Cultural sensitivities must also be taken into account. If you yourself are affected by the tsunami it may be time to call on your leadership team. It may be that having thought about the impact of the disaster on your school community, you decide not to focus on the event.

Acknowledge the event

Many Principals will want to start the school year by acknowledging the events over the school holidays. A mark of recognition is important. Judging how much attention to focus on the losses and disaster will depend on the level of effect the tsunami has had on members of your school community. For those school communities that have had direct involvement in the tsunami and aftermath, the first school day will be one of coming together and identifying the losses and experiences. You will want to come together to mourn the lost and to work towards assisting the remaining members of the family, classmates and teachers. It should be clear that it is okay to speak about the disaster BUT be aware that some may prefer not to. Emerging research in the trauma field has identified that there are some people who cope better by not being forced to relive the experience through talking.

People can be affected differently by the same event.

You don't have to be part of the disaster to be affected by it. Some staff and students will be very distressed by the tsunami and may have found the images in the media disturbing to the point of being traumatised. Others may have already been exposed to catastrophic situations or have suffered significant losses and have a reduced capacity to tolerate more bad news and sadness. Still others may not feel affected at all. Children who are affected might show reactions immediately or reactions may be delayed (occurring weeks or even months later).

Emphasise resiliency

Enhance resiliency through restoring control and predictability for the school community. People generally have existing supports that they turn to when something challenging occurs. Most families provide a support for children. What is often most traumatising about events such as disasters and emergencies is the fact that they are out of control and overwhelming. Bringing back a measure of control can restore personal and community equilibrium and allow people to turn

back to their coping skills and support networks. Routine at school is reassuring. Teachers will become aware of those students who are distressed by the disasters and can refer to the EMA information for teachers and parents to assist in identifying and supporting students, school counsellors are also available for advice and support. You can teach children to cope with distressing events by the way in which you respond.

Be open to talking about the event

Some adults have asked “What if I become upset when I am talking with children about the disaster”. The way in which you talk with children about the event reinforces the notion that the disaster is not so awful that it is unspeakable. If you find yourself becoming distressed when discussing the events with children, take some time to regain composure and then speak with the children about your feelings, use words that will label your distress, like ‘sad’ or ‘upset’. It is not damaging for them to see that adults are upset, if they understand why. It is not helpful for them to see false responses and to get the message that it can’t be spoken about.

Promote a climate of understanding and resilience within your school community

You can do this by acknowledging the event and developing a way in which staff and students can give support to those affected. Schools as communities can assist the wider community in making sense of the event. Fund raising for affected communities and sister school links that promote communication between students caught directly in the tsunami and students in Australia will serve to develop a wider sense of community and support.

Make sure your school emergency management plan is up to date and that students and staff know what plans are in place for safety if an emergency arises.

Most State and Territory Departments of Education require schools to have emergency management plans for a range of incidents. It is reassuring for

students and staff to know that the school is prepared for such events. Teaching about responding to emergencies and preparing for the unexpected may save lives at school and elsewhere.

The Sunday Age, Jan 2, 2005

Phuket

Saved by a lesson

A 10 year hold British schoolgirl saved the lives of hundreds of people in Thailand after learning about tsunamis in a geography class, British media reported yesterday.

Tilly, dubbed the “angel of the beach” by *The Sun* newspaper, was holidaying in Phuket when she suddenly grasped what was taking place and alerted her mother.

“Last term Mr. Kearney taught us about earthquakes and how they can cause tsunamis” Tilly was quoted as saying. “I was on the beach and the water started to go funny. There were bubbles and the tide went out all of a sudden. I recognised what was happening and had a feeling there was going to be a tsunami. I told mummy.”

Her intuition was enough to prompt the evacuation of Phuket’s Maikhao beach and a neighbouring hotel.

Tilly’s geography teacher, Andrew Kearney, told *The Sun* he had explained that the ocean would draw out about 10 minutes before a tsunami struck. **AFP**

Communicate and develop partnerships

Communicate with your school community about the effect the tsunami has had on your school. Parents will be seeking advice on how to help their children make sense of the event and to reassure them that they are safe. Younger children take their measure of threat from the adults around them, supporting teachers and parents will strengthen the children's capacity to manage. Be prepared to be a source of information and reassurance for parents, take the opportunity to educate them about the range of normal reactions they may see in their children.

Recognise other events that have impacted on your school

Be aware that some school community members may have experienced other personal losses and disasters over the break. There have been tragic drownings, loss of life through wildfire and motor vehicle accidents that may have more direct impact on your school than the tsunami. In these circumstances careful management of information will be important.

Don't over expose children to sad stories and images

Vicarious traumatising is an issue when speaking with groups about traumatic events. Some children are able to identify strongly with the victims, even if they have no direct link. This may result in developing a trauma response and being psychologically damaged by the discussions, images and stories. The Australian Psychological Association recommends limiting children's exposure to images of disasters on the television.

When to seek help

For those who have been seriously affected by the tsunami and other events that have occurred reactions may range from nightmares, sleep disturbances, agitation to a general but pervasive feeling of anxiety. Children seriously affected may react with anxiety, a reluctance to separate from care givers, returning to baby talk and bed wetting. Children's behaviour may change, often this is seen

as 'naughty' behaviour, the child may be more active and agitated. A noticeable effect of acute stress is difficulty in concentrating and retaining new information in the short term memory; children and adults alike report this reaction to traumatic stress.

Help should be considered when the reactions last beyond a month and show no signs of diminishing, when the person's own coping responses are not alleviating the reactions and the child/person is finding it difficult to function to their capacity.

Useful websites:

www.health.nsw.gov.au

Coping personally with the tsunamis.

<http://www.dfat.gov.au>

Department of foreign Affairs and Trade

www.centrelink.gov.au

Centrelink 1800 201 123

www.vicparenting.com.au

Traumatic events, media and your child.

Victorian Parenting Centre

www.community.wa.gov.au

Helping children affected by the tsunami

www.dhs.vic.gov.au

Department of Human Services

www.NCTSNet.org

National Child Traumatic Stress Network