



Metro Lutheran
Positive Parenting
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THE EARTHQUAKE IN HAITI: WHAT DO WE TELL THE CHILDREN?

Four and a half years ago, I wrote a column on Dealing with Tragedy and Loss in response to Hurricane Katrina. Early on a Sunday morning, in the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti, I received a phone call from my congregation, asking to reprint it, providing it to parents of Sunday school children, to help them deal with the disaster in their families. With that in mind, I am rerunning the column:

They sound incompatible: dealing with tragedy and loss and positive parenting. But they're not!

None of us want our children to know loss or pain, suffering or tragedy. We'd like to insulate them from illness, injury, death, terrorism, and natural disaster. We'd love to preserve their innocence. But that isn't possible.

Hurricane Katrina, a natural disaster of staggering and mind numbing proportions, struck the Gulf Coast. Pictures, stories, and concern for family and friends became all absorbing.

What about all of the other tragedies? The tsunami that devastated the South Pacific the Christmas after Katrina. War in Iraq and Afghanistan. Terrorism. Plane crashes. School shootings. Injustice. Death of a loved one. End of a relationship. Death of a dream.

Now the horror of such enormous magnitude in the aftermath of the earthquakes in Haiti - photos of desolation, stories of heartbreaking loss, the sheer scale of the devastation.

And, what about the children?

As parents, we have no control over the losses our children will experience, but we can be present with children in times of loss and sorrow, teaching them how to live in and through the hardest times. Adults must be their age-appropriate filters and their wise guides.

What better gift can you give your child than helping them learn to handle loss and tragedy: name it, grieve it, find hope in God's presence and promises, and respond with generosity and care. But, how? Here are a few suggestions:

AVOID

- Telling them that this is God's plan. (God does not cause death and destruction, but promises to be with us in the midst of loss. God brings hope and a future.)
- Watching televised accounts, hour after hour. Young children, not understanding replays, assume that the tragedy happens over and over again.
- Talking about it obsessively within earshot of children.
- Assuming kids won't hear, see, or understand the tragedy.
- Denying, diminishing, or demeaning the loss.
- Insulating them from the loss.

POSITIVE WAYS TO HELP CHILDREN

Tell children, simply, in age-appropriate language, what has happened. Let them hear it from you.

- Name the loss.
- Be present with them.
- Listen to them.
- Answer questions honestly. Sometimes, that answer is "I don't know."
- Name their feelings and give them permission to feel what they feel.
- Grieve it together.
- Immerse them in a community of love, hope and faith.
- Tell and model for them the hope we have in Jesus Christ, who has promised to be with us always, that this life isn't the end of the story.
- Pray.
- Do service that makes a difference to others.

FAMILY ACTIVITIES

1. When a tragedy occurs, gather as a family and pray for all effected.
2. Plan one concrete thing that you can do.
3. For a public loss or tragedy, gather names and stories of specific people and pray for one each day.
4. Select or make a special Christmas tree ornament to commemorate a loss, a concern, or a sorrow your family has experienced this year.
5. As a family, donate whatever you can afford to a charity or cause that is making a difference in healing a tragedy the world has experienced this year.