

The Earthquake Crisis in Haiti

Earthquakes happen all over the world every day. Some are so small that people barely even notice them. Some are so large that they cause a great deal of damage and hurt or kill many people. Earthquakes are a part of our natural world.

An earthquake is a way that the earth “rearranges its face.” Earthquakes occur when the land masses that “float” on the surface of the earth shift position, get locked, and then break free. The energy that is released travels quickly throughout the earth, like ripples from a pebble dropped in a pond.

Earthquakes are one of the most destructive forces in nature. We cannot stop earthquakes from happening. We cannot even accurately predict when and where they will occur. That is one of the reasons that earthquakes are so dangerous.

One thing we do know, however, is that God does not cause earthquakes, just as God does not cause tornadoes or hurricanes or tsunamis or other natural disasters. God is sad when so many people are hurting. God knows that the people and countries who experience earthquakes need help. God wants us to help our neighbors.

Children are particularly touched by what they see and hear on television during times of disasters. We are a global community in that what happens in one part of our world can be seen instantly in another part of the world. The images and stories that are coming from Haiti sadden us all. There are ways to help young children make sense of what they see and hear:

- **Be Accepting**

Children need your acceptance of their feelings during this time. Not only are they sad for the people who are affected, they are also worried about earthquakes happening in their town. Let your children know how you feel and how you cope.

- **Be a Listener**

Be a good listener and non-judgmental in your attitudes toward children's feelings and concerns. Children will have difficulty expressing what is wrong, but you can help them name their feelings and sort out why they feel the way they do.

- **Be Assuring**

Children need assurance of safety and security expressed honestly, realistically, and in terms they can understand. They need reassurance that they are not in danger and are cared for by family members or others who love them. The likelihood of a similar event happening in their town is very small though not totally without possibility. Avoid being overly protective. Talk with your child about concrete things you can do to help make things better for those persons who were involved. You might be surprised at what your child comes up with.

- **Be Comforting**

Allow your children to be more “clingy” than usual. They are seeking security in a time of chaos. The very idea that the earth beneath their feet can “move” in an unpredictable way is very disconcerting.

- **Be Encouraging**

Children need opportunities for venting their feelings, acting out the experience, and telling their stories. Encourage them in means of self-expression that are non-

destructive to themselves or to others.

- **Be Loving and Caring**

Love, love, and more love. Children need to know that you care. That you are available. That your love is deeper and stronger than anything they can imagine. You will always be there for your child.

- **Be Trustworthy**

Children need to know they can trust you—your feelings, what you will do, and what they can expect of the future. Trust is always important to a child, but especially during such times. Make sure they always know where you will be and what arrangements you may have for them.

- **Be Honest**

Be honest in answering children's questions. Give simple facts, without too much information, in a loving, caring atmosphere. Children cope best with what they know. Yes, this earthquake happened. Yes, it was a bad thing. Yes, many people were hurt or killed. Yes, it could happen anywhere in the world. Will it happen here? Probably not. Sometimes all we can say is "I don't know" or "Let's try to find out." Don't be afraid to use words such as "death," or "dying." Your children understand these words on their own level. Earthquakes are not evil, but the effect they have on people is very bad.

- **Be Hopeful**

Children need to know that events like this do not happen all the time. If an earthquake should happen, God is still there with them to help them and strengthen them. People all around them are working to keep them safe.

- **Be Real**

When children watch television, they have difficulty distinguishing between what happened a few days ago and what is happening right now. They also may have difficulty sorting out what is real and what is "make believe." Help them know that the earthquake in Haiti is real. People are hurt and some have died. Journalism in today's world goes for the goriest and grossest stories imaginable just to sell newspapers or attract viewers. Remember, ninety percent of what a child learns comes through the eyes. Avoid watching the news accounts of this tragedy over and over and over again on television. Children might perceive that the earthquake continues to happen.

- **Be Normal**

Put some semblance of stability back into their lives. Keep routines such as bedtime, mealtime, school attendance, and homework, as close to normal as possible. This will help children have a sense of being in control.

- **Be Supportive**

Give the children something constructive to do. Learn as much as you can (on their level) about

where Haiti is and about earthquakes. Talk about the kind of help that is needed. You may not be in a position to contribute financially, but you can pray for the people of Haiti. Focus on positive actions. Talk with children about ways to include other children they may know, either in the community or the church. Take their efforts seriously.

- **Be Understanding**

Children need the calm presence of and contact with family members or adult care givers who understand their feelings and needs. Your role will be to interpret, clarify, and respond to the children's questions. Avoid withholding important information. Children can tell when something is not right.

Ways Children May Respond

After tragedies such as the one in Haiti, children may respond:

physically

- to the sights of the event as seen through television, newspapers, and magazines
- to the sense of not being “safe” in formerly familiar environments and “safe” environments.

emotionally

- by becoming hyperactive, overly busy, active, or restless as they try to make sense of the event
- by becoming egocentric, feeling they are the only ones affected and thinking only of self (Will my home collapse?)
- by being fearful of injury or death to a loved one (such as a sibling who may be in another country or away from home)
- by reacting negatively when separated from the family, or by being afraid they will be left alone
- by becoming friendly and glad to be alive —by becoming very talkative and wanting to share their experiences with everyone
- by overly responding to their emotions of anger by hitting, kicking, or throwing objects
- by being upset more easily or showing worry unnecessarily

psychologically

- by needing to tell their own story over and over
- by becoming dependent and fearful
- by feeling guilt and seeking theological explanations (God did not “cause” this to happen.)
- by role reversal or transference. (If a family member were killed, they may try to fill the missing person's role in the family.)
- by having a higher than normal anxiety and stress level
- by being afraid to go to bed at night or to go to sleep for fear of something happening
- by coping through denial that certain feelings are present, or by suppressing that this is actually happening

socially

- by becoming shy and withdrawn from both adults and peers
- by being overly fearful of new situations and new locales
- by clinging to parents for fear that one or both of them will leave (They may refuse to go to school or church, feeling it is unsafe.)
- by becoming upset more easily (shown by crying, fighting, or exhibiting other forms of disruptive behavior)

spiritually

—by asking questions about God. (Why didn't God stop the earthquake? Why didn't God protect the people of Haiti? If these people were doing nothing wrong, why did God allow this terrible thing to happen?)

—by lacking trust in God (Will God take good care of me? If an earthquake happens in my city or neighborhood, what will happen to me? Who will care for me?)

—by questioning God's presence with us (If God is here, why do I feel so bad? Why didn't God keep these kinds of things from happening?)

Ways to Help Children Express Their Feelings

Water Play

Playing in a tub of warm water stimulates inhibited children and soothes explosive children. A warm bath may help relieve stress.

Play dough

Play dough can be worked or reworked to express feelings of anger, frustration, and anxiety.

Painting

Painting can help children express moods of joy, sorrow, fear, or anger. Children paint what they feel or what matters in their lives. Finger painting is a good medium for such expression.

Puzzles

Puzzles can be a way for children to create order out of chaos. Children whose lives have become disoriented, confused, or disrupted will often feel better after putting a puzzle together.

Toys

Toys can help children relive a bad experience or play out their feelings. Children can often play the role of rescuer, thus living out their feelings of helplessness.

Puppets

The use of puppets enables children to become talkative and to reenact an unhappy experience. Puppets are good listeners.

Cuddly Toys

Sitting quietly with a cuddly toy can soothe a frightened or anxious child.

Music

Music allows an emotional release and the free expression of feelings through songs, creative movement, and games.

Play

Active play allows for release of emotional energy in a socially approved way. Quiet

games may be comforting to a child who chooses to be alone.

Storytelling

Storytelling, drama, and roleplays are ways to help children tell their stories, to act out feelings, and to resolve conflicts.

What Parents Can Do

- Help your children distinguish between the reality of television coverage of the event and the fantasy of movies, especially for young children. This earthquake happened. It is not a movie. The people won't get up after the cameras stop rolling and walk away. People were hurt. Some people died.
- Limit the time you permit your children to watch the news. Watch the news with them and encourage them to talk about what you saw. Correct any misunderstandings and answer any questions.
- Be honest in answering children's questions. Keep answers simple, without giving more information than the child needs at the time.
- Be honest with your own feelings. Discuss these with your children or help them know that you have some of the same feelings that they have.
- Assure them of your love. Reassure them that you will keep them safe and will be there to care for them.
- Help children realize that God did not cause this event as a way to punish people on the earth.
- Provide comfort in ways that feel reassuring to you and to your children.
- Watch for signs of maladjustment to the event. Spend extra time putting children to bed. Leave the night light on, if needed. Give opportunity for them to ask questions, express concerns, or share their feelings before going to sleep.
- Listen to what the children say, how they say it, and what they play. Is there evidence of fear, anxiety, or insecurity? Talk about and clarify any feelings shown in the conversation or play.
- Have quiet family times together. Spend time sharing concerns, expressing feelings, feeling God's reassuring presence, and praying to God to express your needs and concerns.
- Pray together as a family. Assure children that God listens to our prayers and answers

them. That God continues to love us. That God knows our needs. That God cares how they feel, think, or act. That God can take away their fears and anxiety. That God is always with us and will guide us and strengthen us to meet whatever lies ahead—especially during times of crisis.

- Plan for the family to attend church and Sunday school regularly to feel the support and strength of this community of believers.
- Plan a response to the crisis as a family.

What Churches Can Do

- Pray for the persons of Haiti. Pray for the families who lost loved ones. Set up a relief fund working through a church agency or community agencies.
- Engage in Bible study and reflection on God's Creation and how all persons are precious to God and loved.
- Offer your facilities as a collection point for money or supplies.
- Schedule regular prayer vigils for the people who were affected by the tragedy.