

Talking with Children about Disasters

When a disaster occurs, Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, ministers, parents, and caregivers in the faith community should expect that children will be filled with a host of questions and concerns about what has happened and its effects.

These general guidelines can help leaders, parents, caregivers, and pastors talk with and affirm children in direct, sensitive, gentle and honest ways.

Providing Support

- Make children a **priority** in your faith community. Listen to and with your children. Let them ask questions, talk about what has happened, and express their feelings. Be open to sharing your feelings in appropriate ways too.
- **Trust and safety** are deep spiritual needs. Continuously reassure children that you will do everything in your power to keep them safe. Maintaining a regular routine is a form of security for children. You may want to review normal safety precautions with children to reassure them that there is something they can do in an emergency situation.
- Be aware that your child's **age** may affect his or her response. Older children and adolescents in particular may feel despair and anxiety about the future of the earth and humanity. If a young person seems overly withdrawn or anxious you may need to provide extra care to help them deal with their pain, uncertainty, and grief.
- Make sure pastoral caregivers have gone through United Church **screening procedures** before engaging with children and youth. (*Faithful Footsteps, Screening Procedures for Positions of Trust and Authority in The United Church of Canada: A Handbook* is available at www.united-church.ca/handbooks for download.)

Responding Together

- **Include children** whenever possible in communal worship, prayers, and other faith community activities. Children need to experience that a loving community surrounds them and have much to offer the faith community. Their questions, prayers, and spiritual responses will bring a sense of healing and hope to the entire faith community.
- Include children in any **concrete response** you make to a tragedy, whether it is offerings of prayer, money, or other messages of love. Children are better able to feel their own sense of power and security if they can help in some way.
- Children's groups may wish to **initiate** their own loving reaction to a tragedy. Encourage and support them and help them make their plans happen!

Understanding Why

- It is difficult to make sense of enormous disasters. Unfortunately, the question of **why it happened** is the most difficult one to answer. Don't hesitate to say you don't know. Help children instead to focus on the loving things that are happening as a result of this disaster, and that they too can help through prayer and acts of love and kindness.
- We are not alone. Remind children that we believe in a **loving God** who seeks to be in relationship with us. God has not abandoned the victims of tragedy and will not abandon us. God understands pain and suffering and does not wish it on people. We may feel angry with God and may even hear people blaming God for what has happened. God is able to bear and understand our reactions and continue to love us and be present with us.