

Talking with Children about Disasters

News of natural disasters such as the recent earthquake and tsunami in Japan can have an emotional impact on some students. Adults can help students keep events in perspective, however, by understanding how children are affected, watching for signs of emotional distress, and adjusting the response to the maturity level of the child.

Some students are more likely to be upset by news of disasters than others, depending on their proximity to the event and their life experiences. For example, if students have experienced an earthquake themselves they might remember how frightening that experience felt, or if they have recently suffered a loss, such as the loss of a parent, the news of loss of life in the disaster might trigger a significant emotional response.

The table below summarizes suggestions from the National Association of School Psychologists, the Association of Child and Adolescent Psychology, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services regarding indicators that indicate a student might need further support, as well as potential age appropriate responses.

Grade Level	Indicators	Responses
Pre-K to Grade 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regressive behavior – clinging, bed wetting, thumb sucking. • Changes in eating or sleeping patterns. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide opportunities for children to express their feelings through art work or play. • Reassure children. • Maintain schedule to help students regain a sense of structure.
Grades 3-5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regressive behavior. • Sudden discipline problems. • Attention seeking behavior. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create safe opportunity for students to ask questions or talk about their fears: “How do you think other children might feel?” • Answer questions honestly, in age-appropriate language.
Grades 6-8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withdrawing from family or peers. • Reluctance to participate in group activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate discussion of incident. • Encourage empathy for those affected. • Ask students how they could help victims. • Acknowledge that some answers are not yet known.