

## When Students or Staff Lose Loved Ones In Disasters Far Away

Often an earthquake or cyclone several thousands of miles away fails to grab our attention. But then we get to our schools and realize that we have children from every country in the world in our school populations, and they could have relatives who have died or are struggling to recover from a major natural disaster. These children will likely have a difficult time studying and being focused on academics until they know whether their loved ones are alright. Yet we can't put everything on hold for what may turn out to be weeks before the family hears of their loved ones' fates.

Some suggestions for supporting students in the midst of these events might include:

- Reminding students that initial news is nearly always sketchy and incomplete. One thing we need to do is to try to live as best we can amidst the uncertainty initially, and try to not expect that the worst is true.
- Communications always break down (telephones and the internet go down) so it doesn't mean that not hearing from a loved one means they aren't all right. They may be struggling with many things, but may be surviving handily amidst the chaos. Don't jump to conclusions.
- Help children remember or realize that we get through these things together, and that their loved ones have a whole community of people who care about them. In difficult times, people pull together. We can hope that many people who live there are helping one another.
- Mention all of the international programs that swing into action at times such as these. Most children won't even know they exist. Don't promise that these agencies are there and effective, but that (if it is true) it's likely that international groups are responding, such as Red Cross, Mercy Corps., etc. We always feel better when we can take action. Help students brainstorm what they might do to make a difference.
- If it's possible to raise funds, help them organize that. Even just a penny drive makes kids feel like they're doing something. It also reaffirms that if our lives are swept up in a natural disaster, people will arrive to help us as well.
- For those students who may be directly impacted (may have lost family members), there are a variety of questions that might be helpful:
  - What would help you feel better right now?
  - What is one thing that we (in the class) could do that might help you feel better?
  - What do you wish others understood about how this is for you right now?
  - Who are you most worried about?
  - Do you know others who also may be concerned for family members as well?
  - Are there people that you'd like to be with right now - people you know who listen really well - to whom you'd like to tell your story?
  - How has your family coped with difficult times in the past?
  - Who is "there for you" when you aren't at school?

Remember, putting words to our fears is the beginning of mastery. Make space for these children to tell their stories, their fears, and their concerns. To reinforce any of the above points, it is more helpful to the child if we can ask questions that help them discover these points for themselves than if we simply try to tell them and help them understand. If they uncover it, they "own" it, and it will have deeper effect.

