

Children, Teens and the Japan Disaster  
March 17, 2011  
Harry Wang, MD\*  
President, Physicians for Social Responsibility/Sacramento

As we all know, Japan is suffering through a horrific disaster caused by the 9.0 earthquake, tsunami, and probable meltdowns at the Fukushima nuclear power plants. Unfortunately, this crisis will not end any time soon. I have already heard a variety of fears that young clients have expressed as they grapple with this tragedy. Children and teens who have, themselves, experienced traumas and/or losses will be more susceptible to what has happened in Japan. The amount of news that is watched on television may also increase the anxiety level of children and teens.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry has information on children and news of disasters. "Children and the News" can be downloaded at: [http://www.aacap.org/page.wv?section=Facts for Families&name=Children And the News](http://www.aacap.org/page.wv?section=Facts%20for%20Families&name=Children%20And%20the%20News). I have copied their guidelines below (in italics).

*Guidelines for minimizing the negative effects of watching the news include:*

- *monitor the amount of time your child watches news shows*
- *make sure you have adequate time and a quiet place to talk if you anticipate that the news is going to be troubling or upsetting to the child*
- *watch the news with your child*
- *ask the child what he/she has heard and what questions he/she may have*
- *provide reassurance regarding his/her own safety in simple words emphasizing that you are going to be there to keep him/her safe*
- *look for signs that the news may have triggered fears or anxieties such as sleeplessness, fears, bedwetting, crying, or talking about being afraid*

*Parents should remember that it is important to talk to the child or adolescent about what he/she has seen or heard. This allows parents to lessen the potential negative effects of the news and to discuss their own ideas and values. While children cannot be completely protected from outside events, parents can help them feel safe and help them to better understand the world around them.*

As adults it is also important that we monitor our own reactions to these events. One's own history, present sense of safety, and anxieties can effect how we interact with our children and other family members and friends. Here are some helpful guidelines to consider (*in italics*) from the American Psychological Association found at: <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/distress-earthquake.aspx>.

### *Managing Your Distress About the Earthquake from Afar*

*For people with friends and family living in regions affected by earthquakes, watching news coverage of the earthquake's devastation can be very distressing, particularly if there is no news on their safety and well-being. Even for those without personal connections to the country, the news coverage can be overwhelming.*

*APA offers the following tips to manage your distress:*

- Take a news break. Watching endless replays of footage from the disaster can make your stress even greater. Although you will want to keep informed – especially if you have loved ones in earthquake-affected areas – taking a break from watching the news can lessen your distress.*
- Control what you can. There are routines in your life that you can continue such as going to work or school and making meals. It is helpful to maintain these routines and schedules to give yourself a break from constantly thinking about the earthquake.*
- Engage in healthy behaviors. Eat well-balanced meals, engage in regular exercise like going for a long walk, and get plenty of rest. Bolstering your physical well-being is good for your emotional health and can enhance your ability to cope.*
- Keep things in perspective. While an earthquake can bring tremendous hardship and loss, remember to focus on the things that are good in your life. Persevere and trust in your ability to get through the challenging days ahead.*
- Find a productive way to help if you can. Many organizations are set up to provide various forms of aid to survivors. Contributing or volunteering is a positive action that can help you to make a difference.*
- Strive for a positive outlook. Many people who have experienced tragedy find that they grow in some respect as a result of persevering through the hardship. Over time, people can discover personal strengths and develop a greater appreciation for life.*

I hope that these ideas are useful as we interact with children and teens during these difficult times. For those with questions about the Fukushima nuclear reactor plant crisis, please go to [www.psr.org](http://www.psr.org) for updated and background information about the situation as well as information about the public health risks of nuclear power.

\*Dr. Harry Wang is a Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist in Sacramento, California and Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, University of California Davis School of Medicine. He can be reached by telephone at 916 955-6333 or by e-mail at [info@sacpsr.org](mailto:info@sacpsr.org).