

# Children and the Tsunami

## *Occupational Therapy's Response*



**Children have been particularly affected by the recent 9.0 magnitude earthquake and resulting tsunami and massive tidal waves that swept across southern Asia and East Africa on December 26, 2004.**

Although these events have been particularly difficult on children who live in the affected area, children in the United States may also show physical and psychological effects of the trauma. A child's view of the world as a safe and predictable place is temporarily lost after a disaster occurs. They may feel the event may happen again and that they or their family may be killed. The damage, injuries, and deaths that can result from an unexpected or uncontrollable event are difficult for many children to understand.



**Occupational therapy can help children recover quickly and more completely through engagement in the normal daily occupations of childhood (i.e., personal care, family activities, school and play activities).**

Whether practitioners are working in the disaster area or stateside, it is important to let children know they are safe and that parents, teachers, and other adults are there to help. Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants are concerned with children's ability to engage and participate in meaningful daily activities. They help children establish and maintain daily routines that aid in healing, such as dressing, attending school, and playing. They may provide stress management and grief counseling. Children who have existing physical, social, emotional, or learning problems may experience particular difficulties at times of increased stress. Maintaining family and school routines and practicing good health habits and open family communication will also assist children to cope with the added stress.

The following ideas are also suggested.

### What can occupational therapy practitioners do?

- Offer grief counseling for children, parents, and spouses who may have suffered a loss in the disaster.
- Identify clients' meaningful activities.
- Help children and adolescents to establish and maintain daily routines that aid in coping with the direct or indirect effects of a disaster, such as showering, dressing, family activities (chores and fun activities, such as interactive games or family meals), and attending school or church services.
- Encourage children to talk about how they feel. Practitioners working in schools may want to hold group discussions with children about their fears of another disaster.

### What can families do to continue to heal?

- Encourage communication among family members and friends. Disasters can cause sad, angry, or depressed emotions to emerge, and people should be encouraged to talk about their feelings.
- Exercise and eat a balanced diet. Children model the behavior of adults, so parents should set good examples for them.
- Ask for help if you need it. Everyone deals with grief and pain in his or her own way. Talk with someone with whom you are comfortable, such as a friend, family member, minister, occupational therapist, or other health care professional.
- Avoid overexposure to media coverage. The images of the tsunami and the aftermath are daunting. Parents, and especially children, should seek other activities to engage in and not relive the disaster by watching it on television over and over.

### Need more information?

If you would like to consult an occupational therapist for you or your child, talk to your physician about whether a referral to occupational therapy is appropriate.

Occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants are trained in helping adults and children with a broad range of issues, including physical, emotional, and developmental.



For more information on the effects of disaster and trauma on children please visit the following Web sites

#### **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Tsunami Mental Health Resources**

<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/tsunamis/mentalhealth.asp>

#### **American Academy of Pediatrics**

[http://www.aap.org/terrorism/resources/federal\\_resources.html](http://www.aap.org/terrorism/resources/federal_resources.html).



#### **The American Occupational Therapy Association**

4720 Montgomery Lane  
Bethesda, MD 20814-3425  
301-652-AOTA (2682)  
[www.aota.org](http://www.aota.org)

Occupational Therapy: Skills for the Job of Living

**The American Occupational Therapy Association** is the professional society of occupational therapy, representing nearly 35,000 occupational therapists, occupational therapy assistants, and students working in practice, science, education, and research.

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