

Talking with Children About Tsunamis

What is a Tsunami?

Tsunamis are powerful ocean waves produced by an oceanic landslide or earthquake beneath the ocean floor. Tsunamis can occur at any time of the year. When they occur near coastal areas, it may take only minutes for huge waves to travel from the earthquake to the shore. When farther out in the ocean, even traveling at hundreds of miles per hour, a tsunami may take hours to reach land.

Warning Systems for a Tsunami

The International Tsunami Warning System monitors ocean earthquakes and wave activity. The system can issue warnings to officials who can order appropriate evacuations. The United States has two tsunami warning centers, the West Coast/Alaska Tsunami Warning Center in Alaska and the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center in Hawaii, that warn about national and international warnings of tsunamis across the Pacific Ocean.

Tips for Parents and Caregivers

- ❑ Encourage communication among all family members. Be available, positive, and open to all subjects—including conversations about the tsunami. Use family times (such as mealtimes and driving to and from school) to talk about what is happening. If the conversation is distressing, follow it with a favorite story or a pleasant family activity.
- ❑ Answer children's questions truthfully. Do not be surprised that they ask many questions or ask the same question several times. Discuss the event freely, allowing children to express their concerns and views. Ease their worries and correct their misunderstandings.
- ❑ Tell your children how you feel about the recent events. When you express your thoughts and concerns, you help your children talk about their feelings.
- ❑ Monitor children's exposure to disaster-related media coverage. Television, radio, newspapers, magazines, or the Internet may have graphic and disturbing images of death, injury, and damage that can evoke feelings about earlier trauma or loss in their lives. Ask your children about what they saw, heard, or read, and address any concerns they have.
- ❑ Monitor what adults say in front of children about the disaster. Young children may become distressed or confused about things they overhear.
- ❑ Even if living far from the event itself, children who watch media coverage of tragic events may feel overwhelmed and unsafe. They may worry that a tsunami could reach their home and wonder if they, their family, and their friends will be safe. These reactions are very normal and may continue for a long time following news of tsunamis.
- ❑ Identify ways your child might help. When they help others in a time of need, children gain self-esteem and feel empowered.

- ❑ Children might do extra chores, start a project with friends, or participate in school projects to raise money or needed supplies for the disaster area.
- ❑ Reach out to support families in your school or community who have suffered loss or have families or friends living in devastated areas.
- ❑ Use this time to talk with your children about the needs of those less fortunate in your community or state. Consider ways that your family may want to address these needs.

Preparedness

When disasters occur, every family should review their *preparedness plans* for disasters that might affect their area. **Preparedness means talking to your children about how your family will take action effectively in an emergency.** When parents make and practice plans for the safety of the family, they model positive coping strategies. The simple act of putting smoke detectors in your home--and checking them on a regular basis--reduces children's worries about fire. A family preparedness plan for all emergencies increases your children's confidence that your family will stay safe and secure.

- ❑ Make a family preparedness plan. For help, review the Family Preparedness Guide and the Family Preparedness Wallet Card. Have all family members carry the wallet card with them to keep important information and emergency phone numbers at your fingertips. Both the Guide and Wallet Card are available at http://www.nctsn.org/nccts/nav.do?pid=typ_nd_tsum_resource.
- ❑ Know the plans that your child's school has for emergencies.
- ❑ Find out if you live in a tsunami warning area, and learn how to manage the risk of a tsunami at <http://www.tsunamiready.noaa.gov/ts-communities.htm> the National Weather Service's TsunamiReady webpage.
- ❑ Find an online book to read with school-age children about tsunamis at <http://wcatwc.arh.noaa.gov/book01.htm>.
- ❑ Download a tsunami coloring book for younger children at <http://wcatwc.arh.noaa.gov/tommy00.htm>.
- ❑ Find tips on handling different disasters and understanding your children's reactions to them and links to information and resources at the National Child Traumatic Stress Network Website (<http://www.nctsn.org>).
- ❑ Start the conversations. Make a family plan. Learn about your school and community plans. Together you and your family can be prepared.

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