

Talking with Children in the United States about the Tsunami

What is a Tsunami?

Tsunamis are powerful ocean waves produced by a major oceanic landslide or an earthquake beneath the ocean floor. Tsunamis can be very dangerous, but—unlike the recent one in the western Solomon Islands—they are not likely to cause extensive loss of life. Tsunamis can occur at any time of the year. When they are produced in near coastal areas, it may only take minutes for huge waves to travel to the shore. When farther out in the ocean, although the waves travel at hundreds of miles per hour, a tsunami may take several hours to reach land.

Warning Systems for a Tsunami

The International Tsunami Warning System monitors ocean earthquakes and ocean wave activity. The system can issue warnings to officials who can begin 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, which provides both national and international warnings for tsunamis across the Pacific Ocean.

The Recent Tsunami Disaster in the Solomon Islands

The tsunami that hit the Solomon Islands came with no warning and caused tragic loss of life and property, injury, life-threatening experiences, and destruction of infrastructure in the coastal communities of many countries. The children and families in this region now face extensive post-disaster adversities—medical, economic, and psychological. As the world continues to learn more about the disaster and to respond to the many and varied needs, children in the United States may have questions about the recent events. Below are some tips for parents and caregivers.

Tips for Parents and Caregivers

- Create an environment that supports communication among all members of the family. 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 in the world. In listening to children, parents can ease children's worries by correcting any misunderstandings and confusions. Follow the conversation with a favorite story or a pleasant family activity.
- Answer children's questions truthfully. Children may have lots of questions about the tsunami, and parents should not be surprised if a child repeats the same question several times. It is important for children to discuss the event freely and express their concerns and views.
- Let your child know how you feel about the recent events. When parents express their thoughts and concerns, it can help children talk about their own feelings as well.
- Monitor children's exposure to disaster-related media coverage. Television, radio, newspapers, or magazines may contain graphic and highly disturbing images of death, injury, and damage. Older children may have unmonitored access to these via the Internet. These images may evoke feelings about earlier traumas or losses in their lives. Check in with your children about what they have watched, heard, or read and address any concerns they may have.
- Monitor adult conversations in front of children about the disaster. Young children may become more distressed or not fully understand what is being said.

- Be aware that, even removed from the event itself, children who hear about or watch these tragic events may feel overwhelmed and unsafe. They may worry about their own security, and that of family and friends. They may wonder about the likelihood of a tsunami reaching their home. They may have concerns about family vacations to coastal areas or islands. Know that these reactions are very normal and are unlikely to continue for an extended period of time.
- Identify ways for your child to help. When they reach out to help others in a time of need, children gain self-esteem and a sense of how to respond constructively. If available, your children might participate in school or community projects designed to help raise money, supplies and materials for the disaster area. Your child might want to do extra chores or a project to help raise money for the relief funds.
- Keep in mind that there may be families in your school district or community who may have suffered loss and/or continue to worry about family or friends living in the devastated areas. Providing support to these families and children can also be a helpful step.
- Use this time to talk with your children about the needs of others who may be in difficult circumstances, both in the Solomon Islands as well as in your community. Consider ways that your family may want to address these needs.

Preparedness

As the world responds to help those affected by the tsunami, this is also an important time for every family to review their preparedness plans for disasters that may affect their area. **Preparedness means talking to your children about how the family can take action and effectively respond to emergencies.** When parents take action, they teach their children the power of coping through preparedness. 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 will increase your children's confidence that your family will stay safe and secure.

- Make a family preparedness plan. For help in developing these plans, review the **Family Preparedness Guide** and the **Family Preparedness Wallet Card** at http://www.nctsnet.org/nccts/nav.do?pid=typ_nd_flood_readiness&disasterType=flood&navPid=typ_nd_flood_desc. Carry the wallet card with you to keep important information and emergency phone numbers quickly available.
- Be aware of plans that your child's school has set in place for emergency situations, including evacuation plans and communication with families.
- For families that live in tsunami risk areas, or to see if you live in one, the National Weather Service has developed a **Tsunami Preparedness Initiative**, and a range of materials on how to manage the risk of a tsunami, which are available at <http://www.tsunamiready.noaa.gov/ts-communities.htm>.
- For school-age children who are concerned about tsunamis or live in a tsunami risk area, consider reading with them an on-line book about tsunamis that can be found at <http://wcatwc.arh.noaa.gov/book01.htm>. Download a tsunami coloring book for younger children at <http://wcatwc.arh.noaa.gov/tommy00.htm>.
- To find tips on handling different disasters and understanding your children's reactions to them, go to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network Website at www.nctsnet.org.

Start the conversations. Make a family plan. Learn about your school and community plans. Together you and your family can be prepared.

This project was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The views, policies, and opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA or HHS.