CHENNAI FLOODS- How do we help our children emerge strong and resilient?

It has been a time of devastation and destruction for Chennai. All around, efforts are on to make sure that every citizen is rescued, has food to eat, dry clothes to wear and a roof over their head. As relief operations get over, we will need to move on and think about rebuilding our lives. As we do this, it is important to recognize the impact of this event on everyone one of us and especially on those most vulnerable - children!

All children - those whose homes have been flooded and may have had to be evacuated, who may have had terrifying or exciting experiences of being rescued, and those who lost all their precious belongings… These kids may be wondering:



Will I be OK? Will everyone I love be OK? Will my life be the same again?

And even those children, who have not been at risk but have watched countless images on TV of what is happening around them, will be trying to make sense of it. They may be filled with many questions.

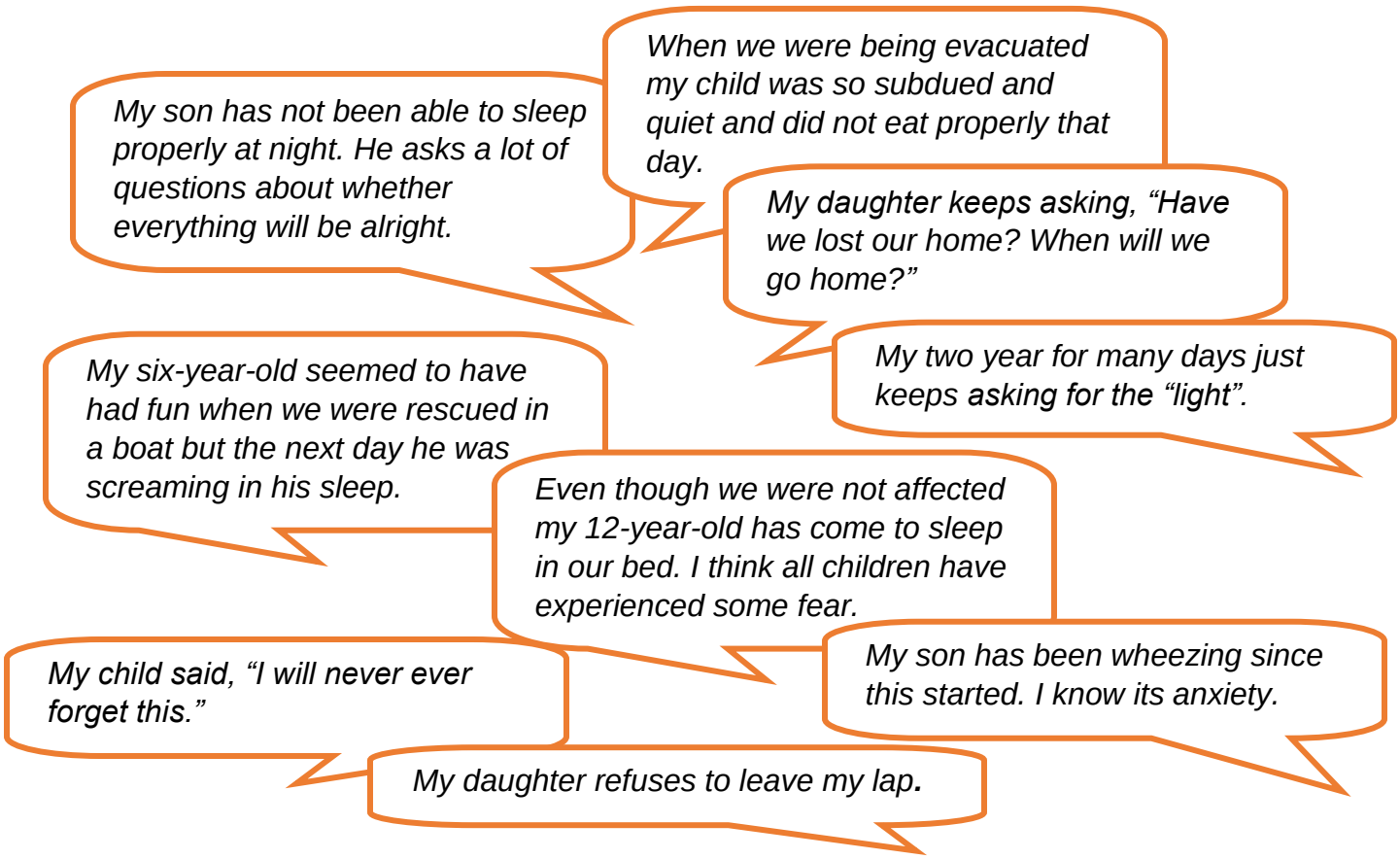
Why is this happening? Can it happen to me too? Why have so many people lost their homes? It's scary without electricity!

Most often, we do not immediately see any obvious effects on children. They may be looking at it as an adventure and be excited by the events. But as things sink in, this experience could have affected them in ways we cannot imagine.
There is research and evidence that tells us that disasters like this can cause trauma in children and have deep psychological effects if not addressed.

This article is a resource for families to get ideas on how to create spaces for children at a time like this to express themselves and go forward, not with fear and insecurity, but with hope and confidence. It is an effort to make all adults **trauma informed.**

It is also a resource to help all children in Chennai to process these events and turn them into opportunities for reflection and learning.

These are some observations which parents have shared after the Chennai floods:



Many parents also shared that they found their children bounced back to normal within a day or two. In such cases parents may be reluctant to go back and relive the incident, thinking the child has got over it and it is unnecessary to speak about it.

Yes, the child may seem to have moved on but unless we give these children opportunities to work through the feelings associated with this event, it is very possible that some fear and insecurities stay with them which can trigger off at any point.

For example, any time they are in a situation of heavy rain they may start panicking. So helping children process this experience is very important for them to come out strong. How can we do this?

PART 1: FOR FAMILIES WHO HAVE FACED CRISIS - HOMES FLOODED, TRAPPED AND ISOLATED, OR HAVING TO BE EVACUATED.



My home was full of water. We had to move out/ we were trapped upstairs. I was scared, wondering if we would be ok. Would we have enough food or water? Now I am exhausted, worried, stressed out- wondering how to bring our lives back to normal.

It is very hard for you as a parent. You have brought your family to safety and now your immediate thoughts are on how to rebuild your life. You are mourning your losses- maybe important documents, money and valuables. Many things your family saved up to buy have been destroyed - your car, refrigerator, furniture. You are struggling with repair and restoration of your home and are worried about your finances. Although there is relief in being safe, being displaced from your own home brings up a lot of feelings. Feelings of loss, anxiety, guilt and helplessness. With all these feelings, you yourself need some self-care and self-empathy, and it's very hard to think about what is happening to your child.



It is important for you to recognize what you are going through!

HOW TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF, SO THAT YOU CAN TAKE CARE OF YOUR CHILDREN:

Each of us has our own way of coping with emotions and situations that works for us. Here are some suggestions:

- You could find a friend or family member with whom you feel safe to share your feelings of sadness, worry, guilt or anger - talk, cry, shout!!! Discuss what this experience has done to you. Ask that person to just listen, and not say things like “You should be happy to be alive. See what others have gone through.” Your suffering is real for you.

- Some of us do not like to take help from others. We may be going through a lot if we are staying with relatives and feel that we are a burden. Accept the help. Your relatives may also feel glad to have the opportunity to reach out.
- Try to eat properly, sleep well and remain physically active.
- Avoid watching the news continuously. It will bring all the bad memories back.
- Although it will be hard, try to get into a routine.
- If possible, focus on the things you can be grateful for - safety, help from others, your family. This will help you feel hopeful.

Understanding how you feel and finding your way to higher ground is critical in order to help the children you love and care for. Even when they are babies, children can see, hear, and feel our pain and despair, and they look to us for understanding, reassurance, and hope. They have a sixth sense that detects unease and uncertainty. The first step in helping children cope with catastrophe is to sort through our own feelings and get the support that we need. Children need all the love, strength, and reassurance that we can muster. Their sense of safety stems from us: the big, strong adults who protect them from misfortunes that they never imagined.

Excerpt from
http://www.brighthorizons.com/resources/pdf/talktochildren/docs/What_Happened_to_MY_World.pdf

OBSERVE YOUR CHILDREN

When you feeling calmer, observe what is happening with your children. Each child is different and may react in different ways. Some may have found it exciting and did not show any signs of stress immediately, but it may come up later when they begin to feel their losses. Some children may show their stress through behaviours like nightmares, clinging, refusing to let their parents out of sight, or even having tantrums or being aggressive. Young children may 'behave badly' when they are worried or scared; they can 'act out' as a way of asking for help. You may not even connect as to why the child is doing some things.

What children need most is:

Space to express their emotions

Reassurance - a feeling of safety

Allowing feelings to come out is the first step to healing.

With all that we are going through, we may not have the patience for our children's feelings or questions. We may not recognize what is playing on their minds and may try and distract them by not talking about what has happened. But to help them recover, we need to actually encourage them to understand what happened and form a **narrative** (More below on narrative) which helps to heal and overcome their fears and anxieties and come out of this incident stronger.

- Help your child name how she feels: "scared," "terrified," "angry," "sad." Tell her it's OK to feel that way. Don't try to say, "You should be grateful, others are suffering more." or "Don't worry about your toys, we will buy new ones." Each loss of a precious item is big for the child. Acknowledge it by saying, "I can imagine how sad you are that your favorite doll got washed away." Allow the child to feel what she is feeling.
- If she is hitting to express frustration say to her, "It's OK to be angry but it's not OK to hit me or others. "Shall I give you a pillow to punch?"
- Help your child express her anger in ways that won't hurt, using words, play, or drawings.
- After allowing feelings to come out, talk about the things that are going well, make plans together for the future to help you and your child feel good.

Some suggestions for engaging with your child:

Remember: Use whatever works for you and your child. Each child is different. Take cues from the child and see if the child is wishing to share. Sharing cannot be forced. For some children it may come out many weeks later.

1. **Giving the child a narrative :**



A narrative is the real sequence of events in the child's life along with his feelings, which helps him make sense of his reality.

A narrative is simply telling the story of an incident or a situation that has happened. Enable your child to tell the story of what happened during and after the crisis event. Having a story helps your child make sense of what happened and cope better with it. Some children use play to tell their story. Join your child in showing and telling not only what happened, step by step, but also how you both felt. As you tell the story, follow your child's lead. When the

story is difficult, your young child may need breaks: running around, being held, playing something else. This is OK. He will come back to the story when he is ready. It can be hard to watch your children's play or listen to their stories of what happened. Get support if it is too hard for you to listen without becoming upset. Following is an example of how the narrative may be:



The water started coming into our house. That was scary for you too. Then we all were so happy when the rescue workers came on the boat. They came to take us to safety. There were so many good people helping us. We came to Patti's house.

Now we are going to stay here till our home is ok. Our home will be ok. We will go back and see what happened to your toys. You are sad that your toys may have gone away in the water.
Now, Appa, Amma and you are safe together and that's what is most important. We will always take care of you.

According to the age of the child, you can talk about it, draw pictures together or ask them if they want to write it in the form of a story.

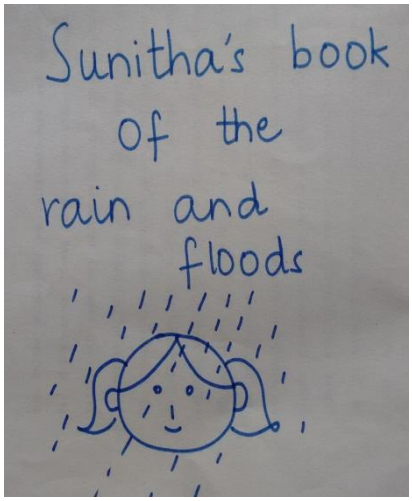


Having a narrative helps the child to make sense of the event, to process it and hence cope better with it.

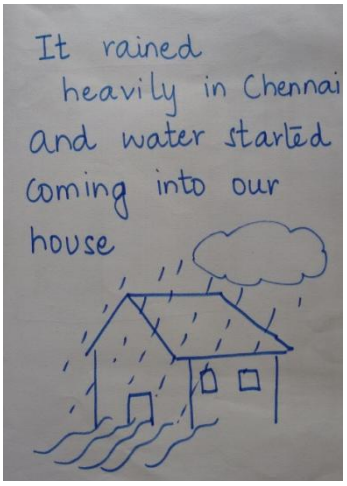
2. Empathy books

Parents can make **empathy books** with their children to help them express their story. An empathy book is a wonderful tool that helps children understand what is happening in their lives and can be used specifically as a healing mechanism. It also builds emotional literacy. It is a small book with pictures and writing that the parent makes with the child at that point when feelings come up. The parent can ask a young child what he or she is feeling and draw and write for them or the child may want to draw and write. The important part is to name the feeling and not try to cover it up and make a happy ending. It is just an opportunity for the child to express himself, though the book may feel incomplete to you. When we name the feeling the child feels understood and connected to the parent. It also helps the child know that we are taking her feelings seriously. Children may keep picking up the book and ask you to read it with them again or want to make new books. For this activity to be meaningful it must be done together - parent and child.
See example below:

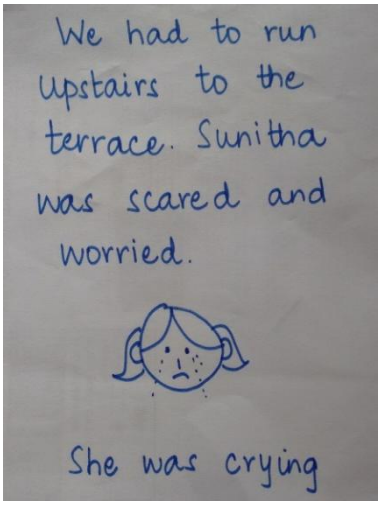
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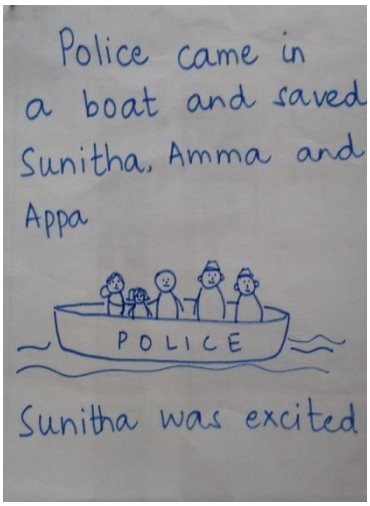
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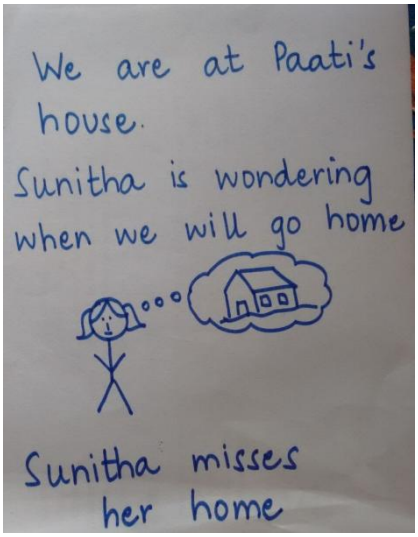
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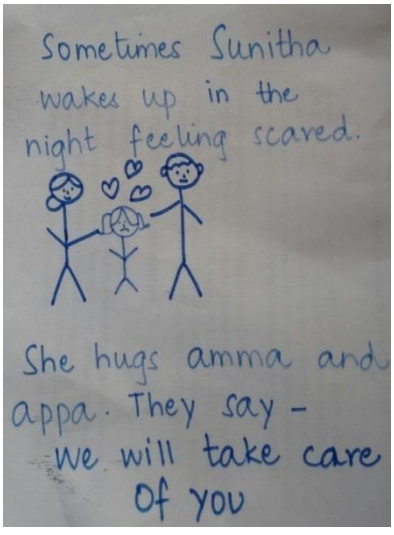
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To know more about empathy books, check out this video
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruzGK8ySay0

3. **Expressing through art**

Doing art work with children who have been in a traumatic situation is a powerful tool to help children express and address their inner fears, anxieties as well as any other feelings they may be going through. Have paper, crayons, paints, pens and pencils on hand so that your child can draw or paint, about the incident.



We may discover many things going on in the child's mind through what he draws. For example, he may draw his house under water, or some family members struggling in water. When the child shares the drawing with you, you can ask him to describe what he has drawn and also ask questions like, “When the water became so high how did you feel?”
Sometimes, the child may not want to talk about it, but the art will give clues to the adult about things that may be troubling the child.

4. **Writing**

Older children especially teenagers may find it very hard to express their feelings. Many youngsters in Chennai have expressed a lot of anger as they understand the role of the government in worsening this situation. They blame the administration for corruption and wrong decisions. This can lead to cynicism and hopelessness. We must not allow such feelings to build up in the next generation. Encourage them to take action by writing to the Corporation, getting involved in campaigns etc. Can we motivate them to play an active role in creating a better society?
To deal with their own feelings they could write letters, poems, or stories or keep a journal. Getting involved in helping others who have suffered will help them too and make them see that in all the bad things happening there are good things happening too.

OUR MOST IMPORTANT JOB- HELPING CHILDREN FEEL SAFE

Author of the book “Brain Rules”, John Medina, who is a geneticist and microbiologist, says that many of us think that the primary job of the brain is learning. But this is not true. The primary job of the brain is survival, and so seeking safety is the first priority of the brain. Hence, all those who are responsible for children - parents, teachers, caregivers - should pay utmost attention to what children need to feel safe. While this is true at all times, it is even more important in times of crisis.
We want our children to come out of such events strong, confident and resilient. Not scared and insecure. What can we do to give them that sense of safety?

Some suggestions:

- Hug them, **reassure them**. Talk to them. Say “Amma and Appa will always take care of you. We are here with you. Things will be ok.”
- **Work on your own feelings.** If you are scared, they will feel scared. If you can be calm and strong, so will they. When parents feel a sense of safety, the child also feels reassured.
- **Answer their questions honestly** and with patience. “What will happen to our house? What will happen to my toys and books? When can we go back?”
- **Do not give false reassurances,** e.g. saying “Your things are fine”. Instead, say “I know you are worried about your toys. I hope they will be fine. Maybe some things will be spoilt. We will need to see. I know this is hard for you.”
- **Keep children away from frightening TV images** and scary conversations.
- Do familiar things, like singing a song you both like or telling a story, playing or doing an activity together.
- Let him know what will happen next (to the degree that you know).
- **Try to go back as soon as you can to a predictable routine**, at meal times, at least for bedtime: a story, a prayer, cuddle time.
- **Leave children with familiar people** when you have to be away. Tell them where you are going and when you will come back.
- While there may be many things that we need to attend to and may even want to go out and help others, **our physical presence and availability to our children is very important for them to feel reassured.**

PART 2: FOR FAMILIES WHO HAVE BEEN ON SAFER GROUND

When something like this happens, it actually affects EVERYONE, though the extent of impact varies. The Chennai floods really did sweep across the entire city, though some people were

more affected than others. Even if families were not in danger of having their homes flooded, many were cut off without access to enough food and water, and had to manage till the water receded. With no power, there was fear about water supply. When there was electricity, children were watching the images of the destruction for hours on end.
How has this affected them? Some may have felt fearful, but perhaps others were indifferent. Indifference could also be because it's scary to pay attention and imagine that this could happen to you.

What kind of conversations can we have with our children about what is happening?



- It is better if children do not watch endless images of such an event. The news is draining and exhausting to watch and does not give them a good understanding of events.
- Children need us to make time to answer their questions. They may ask questions such as - Why is this happening. Can it happen to us? Why are we without electricity? Why do we have to be careful with the drinking water?
- To encourage children who have not been affected to develop compassion, share with them stories of specific individuals (especially those people they know) and what happened to them. E.g. "*Can you imagine how scary it was for Satya? She must be so upset about what has happened to all her things. It must be so hard for them to leave their home like that. When you meet her in school, how would you like to support her?"*
- We can also expose them to heroic stories of what people did to rescue others and the courage and concern that people have shown.

<u>We can raise questions and have a discussion with older children on topics such as:</u>

- Why do you think this happened?
- How much of it was due to natural causes and how much manmade?
- How could so much damage have been avoided?
- How should cities be built? Why are our cities crowded?
- Why have more poor people lost their homes? Why were they living in the lowest lying areas?
- How have we individually been responsible for contributing to the problem?
- Is there a connection between this event and climate change?
- What can we do to avoid such a situation in the future?



Such discussions will help children explore geography, science, environment, civics, etc. and give them deeper understanding of

the world they live in. It will help them move away from feelings of helplessness to being aware citizens.

Children have a great deal of compassion and would naturally want to reach out and help. How can we encourage them to do this?

1. Start with finding out who has been affected by the flood. Discuss with your child about what they need and how we can help them, e.g. asking if they have any toy or clothes they would be happy to give. Or go together to buy them provisions or clothes if they so need.

2. Find out about places where relief work is going on - maybe a community kitchen - and go with your child and volunteer there.

3. If there is an affected area or a relief centre nearby, you can visit it with your child, even if it is just to talk to people and come to know about their struggles.

CONCLUSION:

Natural and manmade calamities are an overwhelming experience for both parents and children. They are also a time to pull ourselves together to lead the way in keeping our family and community safe. These will be experiences that we will carry with us for the rest of our lives. Being **trauma informed** of the impact of such events is crucial to helping ourselves and our children. Together making sense of this reality will help us effectively deal with and overcome it.

Together we have an obligation to raise and educate a generation of healthy, vibrant children who live in the world with confidence and wisdom, understand the natural world, and are committed to making the world a better place.

Please note: If children continue to show signs of trauma such as nightmares, clinging a lot, being fearful or physical symptoms like bedwetting or wheezing, you may need to seek the help of a professional.

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