



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. Here 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 teachers 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.



BACK TO SCHOOL ... SO MUCH TIME LOST ... WHERE DO WE BEGIN?!

After one and half months of schools being shut, teachers are under tremendous pressure to make up for lost time. Those who are teaching children who will be doing board exams are in an even worse situation. In our rush to finish portions and prepare children for exams, let us be mindful that the city has gone through a tremendous upheaval which would have had an effect on each and every child.

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

My son has not been able to sleep properly at night. He asks a lot of questions about whether everything will be alright.

When we were being evacuated my child was so subdued and quiet and did not eat properly that day.

My daughter keeps asking, "Have we lost our home? When will we go home?"

My two year for many days just keeps asking for the "light".

My six-year-old seemed to have had fun when we were rescued in a boat but the next day he was screaming in his sleep.

Even though we were not affected my 12-year-old has come to sleep in our bed. I think all children have experienced some fear.

My son has been wheezing since this started. I know its anxiety.

My child said, "I will never ever forget this."

My daughter refuses to leave my lap.

My teenage child is so angry as he understands that its government apathy which had led to our losses.

My son and many of his classmates are terrified to face the upcoming board exams.

Many parents also shared that they found their children bounced back to normal within a day two. In such cases adults 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, children may seem to have moved on or may have pushed their feelings under the carpet so as to not upset their parents who are already going through so much. But it is important we give these children opportunities to work through the feelings associated with this event, as it is very possible that some fear and insecurities stay with them which may show up in their behaviour, studies, concentration and interaction with others.

If children are carrying these big feelings, learning will be slow. Research shows us that when their brains are flooded with emotions, it is hard for anyone to access their higher brains with which we do the work of learning.

Hence as mentors and guides for the children, we need to help them deal with what they have gone through and make sense of it. These articles in our newspapers this past week highlight this need. <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-tamilnadu/schools-shouldnt-focus-only-on-syllabus-experts/article7982100.ece>

<http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/chennai/children-may-need-help-soon-mental-health-experts/article7973274.ece>

There is evidence to suggest that at times adults in wanting to protect their children do not allow them to talk about the tragedy and thereby make them suppress their feelings. This may delay the healing process and increase the chance of the child being mentally scarred forever.

from - UNICEF document- Life has changed- Resource for teachers –
http://www.unicef.org/rosa/Life_has_changed_Teachers_guide.pdf

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE TEACHERS....WHAT HAVE THEY GONE THROUGH?

We would recommend that every school have staff meetings and small group discussions with teachers to first come to know what experiences they have had. Teachers themselves may be in a state of trauma or be in shock, or may have suffered huge losses and be in the process of recovering and rebuilding their lives. To reach out to children they may first need a lot of support themselves. Create spaces for both teaching and non-teaching staff to share and to be heard and get support and nurturing from one another.

For more ideas on how to cope with your own feelings read the Chennai flood document for parents – <http://parentingmatters.in/testimonials-3>

When teachers feel supported and are able to come to terms with what they have gone through, they would be willing to discuss ways of helping children in the classroom.



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

WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO TO HELP CHILDREN?

At a time like this, what do children need most?

Space to express their emotions

Reassurance - a feeling of safety

- ✓ When children return to school keep a lot of space for them to share what has happened to them over the past one month.
- ✓ For those who have been affected, sharing with their classmates will help in their healing.
- ✓ For those who have not been directly affected hearing their friend's stories is very important to build empathy and compassion and reach out to their own classmates. They may come forward to help their classmates in so many ways- maybe helping with notes for those who have lost their books etc
- ✓ For teachers to know individually about children who have been displaced is important. It may show up in their behaviour, they may do things which are disruptive. The teacher who knows the background can reach out to the child.
- ✓ If teachers do not have classroom time to listen to each one's stories, ask them to write about it and through their written work you will come to know what they have been through.
- ✓ If some have had a particularly bad experience, make time to talk to them individually.





ACTIVITIES TO HELP CHILDREN PROCESS THIS EVENT:

What is the purpose of such activities?

For children to recover well from such disasters, we need to actually encourage them to understand what happened and form a story of the events.

What happens when such a trauma stays with a child: Even in their adult life if they are in a situation of heavy rain, they may start panicking and find it hard to deal with it. The brain goes into fight or flight mode very quickly when faced with crisis.

These activities will help to **overcome their fears and anxieties and heal** and come out of this incident stronger and more confident.

We may wonder if there is a purpose to such activities if only some children were affected. But in reality every child in the city has been impacted directly or indirectly.

Even those, whose homes were not flooded, have watched endless coverage on TV and maybe feeling helpless to know so many others suffered including their classmates. Those without electricity for days could have found it frightening. They may have seen their parents get anxious about food and drinking water and this may have scared them. Hence all children will have something to share about this disaster.



This sharing can be encouraged through activities such as story completion, sentence completion, drawing, writing, working with clay.

For details of how to conduct these activities read the document sent to your school- Classroom activities to help children process what they have gone through in the Chennai floods

Each group of children and each classroom is unique and different. These are ideas which can be adapted and built upon according to the needs of the children in your class. Teachers can support each other to develop ideas which work for your particular environment.

Discussion around these activities:

The teacher can use the guidelines given for communication below to facilitate these activities. The purpose is to make the child feel heard. For them to know there are caring adults who will keep them safe and for them to know that we take their feelings seriously...that they do not



have to hide and pretend to be “brave”. It will also help them to feel connected to the teacher and their classmates.

If the teacher comes to know from drawings, writings, conversation or behaviour that a child is particularly disturbed, call the parent to discuss what needs to be done to help them child, even professional help is required.

GUIDELINES FOR COMMUNICATION WHEN CHILDREN SHARE:



If we want to help children heal, the most powerful tool is allowing them to share without giving them reasons and logical answers.

Allow them to name the feelings - I was **scared**. I am **sad** that my books and toys got spoilt. I am **angry** this happened.

The teacher can even write many feeling words on the board - upset, frightened, excited, irritated, and sad and let them use what resonates for them. This helps children build emotional intelligence.

Do not brush their feelings aside by saying, “Don't worry. It will all be fine. Be grateful, others have suffered more than you.”

Every child's loss is real for them.

Acknowledge their feelings by saying,

- “I can imagine you are upset.”
- “I know this must be a hard time for you.”
- “You miss the things you lost.”

For older children:

- “You may have felt worried and responsible for the elders in the house”
- “I see you are upset about the damage to your home and the stress for your parents.”
- “Looks like you are angry about the man made contribution to this.”



USING THIS OPPORTUNITY, WE CAN HELP CHILDREN TO REFLECT, LEARN AND GAIN A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORLD AROUND THEM

With younger children:

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

- One can take specific newspaper articles and use them for discussion. Children can be asked to bring articles they want to share. It can be small incidents of heroic ways in



which people were rescued or bigger issues of why the reservoir was opened. Advise parents and children not to watch endless images of such an event on TV. The news is draining and exhausting to watch and does not give them a good understanding of events.

- If a young child is asking questions about the event, answer them simply without the elaboration needed for an older child or adult. Some children are comforted by knowing more or less information than others; decide what level of information that particular child needs.
- To encourage children who have not been affected to develop compassion, have them listen to others tell their stories. Have a discussion like this (maybe in smaller groups)
Looks like it was scary for Satya? She must be so upset about what has happened to all her things. It's hard to leave your home like that. Satya, how are you feeling now?

With older children:

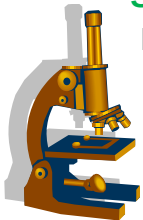
Discussions around this event with older children can be woven into a number of subjects. They can delve deeper into what happened and come to know more about our role in these events. This understanding can empower them to know what we can do to avoid such situations in the future and what citizens can do for a better future.



Geography:

Studying the map of the city. Understanding what are low lying areas and drainage. What has been done to hamper natural drainage processes?

How should urban planning be done? Where the reservoirs and what was the issue Chennai faced with regard to these.



Science:

Disasters- Manmade or natural? How much is due to climate change? How much due to poor governance? What is the main cause of climate change? What do each of us do to contribute to global warming?

Why was the electricity switched off? What happened when the sub stations were flooded? What are the main sources of electricity for Chennai? What is the main source of electricity for Chennai? Why was diesel in short supply? How do generators and inverters work?



History and Civics:

When has Chennai received this kind of rainfall in the past and what was the effect then? What is the effect now and why is it different?

What is the role of civic bodies in this? Who is responsible for drainage and



urban planning? Why were so many people living in low lying areas? Who were the groups most affected and why? If we want to avoid such a problem in the future what has to be done? What role can I play as a citizen?



Language

Children can be encouraged to write stories, essays, poems, and letters to the authorities demanding action. They can even use drama to enact their experiences. This will be cathartic. We can also expose them to heroic stories/ newspaper articles of what people did to rescue others and the courage and concern that people have shown. This would inspire them. Such discussions will give them deeper understanding of the world they live in. It will help them move away from feelings of helplessness to being aware and empowered citizens.

Children have a great deal of compassion and would naturally want to reach out and help. This also makes them feel less helpless. How can we encourage them to contribute?

Children can help in relief efforts whether by collecting clothes and other things for victims, volunteering in a community kitchen or by reaching out to whomever they know who has been affected.

How teachers can support parents:

Parents will frequently look to you for advice. Help them understand their children's behavior. Some parents get angry or upset when their children act frightened or "abnormal". Tell the parents that the behavior is a natural response to the disaster and explain to them what the child needs from them. If the child continues to be disturbed for a long period of time, the family and you may need to seek professional help for the child. Parent's reaction to the disaster and child's behavior is strongly linked with the child's ability to deal with distress. Parents may also be so upset that they may not be aware of their child's troubles. Help parents to realize how important it is that they take care of themselves and their own needs so that they are better able to help the child to cope with the situation. If you as a teacher feel that a parent is not able to provide a secure environment for their child, then you may suggest professional help to support the parent in their coping process.- UNICEF document- Life has changed- Resource for teachers

Encourage parents to use this resource to help their children process what has happened-

<http://parentingmatters.in/testimonials-3>



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.

Acknowledgements:

Grateful thanks to:

Padmaja, Robina, Dinesh and Kavitha for sharing their stories and helping us understand what is happening for children.

Uma Shanker, Director, Centre for Montessori Training Chennai for her encouragement and support in getting this document out to as many teachers and parents as possible.