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Saving the "tsunami generation:" The challenges facing children, and how you can help

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At the largest refugee camp in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, kids crowd around the new delivery, pressing tightly together and exclaiming as each new item emerges from the crates. There have been boxes filled with syringes and antibiotics, stores of rice and protein bars, and bundles of warm blankets. But it's this new shipment — of "recreation kits" complete with games, sports equipment, and art supplies — that has these children cheering with excitement. "You should have seen these kids' faces when they saw the footballs and cricket bats," says Simon Ingram, an official with UNICEF, which distributed the kits as part of a pilot project with Save the Children.

"We want to restore a sense of normalcy and routine to the lives of the children by providing a safe space for them in the camps where they can participate in activities like sports," says Eileen Burke, a field officer with Save the Children who's currently in Banda Aceh. "They need to be able to use creativity, such as drawing, to express their feelings when they may not be able to verbalize them."

The waters from the December 26, 2004, tsunami have receded. As the rebuilding process begins, aid agencies and trauma specialists say that giving children in the affected countries a sense of safety and security is crucial. "When children have been through something as profoundly traumatizing as this, it's natural for them to relive the terrifying experience over and over again," says Terri Pease, a trauma specialist with the Domestic Violence and Mental Health Policy Initiative in Chicago. "The most important thing right away is to help them feel protected and safe."

That's not easy to do, unfortunately. The tidal wave that flooded communities on all sides of the Indian Ocean rates as one of the largest natural disasters of all time. Death tolls continue to rise, officially topping 150,000 as of mid-January. It's estimated that a third of those who died were children, who were more vulnerable to the towering waves because they weighed less and weren't strong swimmers. The adult dead included many fathers and mothers — in the hardest hit areas of Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Southern India, many children lost one or both parents, as well as brothers and sisters, grandparents, and extended family. Many families were scattered, and efforts are still under way to match children with their desperately searching parents. The number of children orphaned by the tragedy is still to be determined, but experts say it could be as high as 13,000. And when you include children who lost one parent, the number could rise to as high as 39,000.

"The first step is keeping children alive"

Relief workers in the tsunami-affected regions say it's impossible to picture the devastation without seeing it firsthand. "Children ask me every day if they can go home, but their homes are gone," says Eileen Burke of Save the Children. Many of the survivors are injured or sick, some afflicted by infections that prey on those hurt during the flooding. "This is the tropics, so if you get a cut or wound, it can easily get infected and gangrene and sepsis can set in," says Barry La Forgia, executive director of International Relief Teams (IRT), a small charity based in San Diego that focuses on providing medical supplies and medical relief personnel. In many places, floodwaters contaminated drinking water and destroyed sewage facilities, so dysentery and parasites are rampant. The World Health Organization has estimated that 150,000 people are at "extreme risk" of dying from preventable diseases if they don't receive clean water and medical care.

With health and sanitation issues so urgent, along with lack of food and shelter, relief efforts are focusing on the basics. In a four-point program issued by UNICEF on January 6, "the first step is keeping children alive," says Simon Ingram of UNICEF. That means vaccinating kids against fast-spreading diseases like measles; preventing tetanus and gangrene from setting in as a result of wounds; fortifying children with rice, milk, and other rations; and setting up shelters — mostly plastic tents — to protect the displaced, who number more than 500,000 in Indonesia alone, from the continuing

storms. The other priorities in UNICEF's program to help the tsunami generation are equally important: reuniting families, keeping children safe from exploitation, and getting kids back to school.

The need is great, but the response has also been extraordinary. Contributions from around the world total almost 4 billion in aid if promised money comes through, according to Oxfam International. And not all of this money is from governments and big international agencies. The Web site for USAID lists more than 80 organizations — from venerable relief groups like the Red Cross and UNICEF to tiny local groups — participating in relief efforts, many of which are raising money directly via the Internet. And some experts estimate that the amount of money raised through private donations in the United States may surpass the \$350 million President Bush has promised in government aid.

Bringing families back together

Aid agencies have set up a mass registration effort, photographing all the children who pass through the camps and other temporary shelters, and recording names, communities of origin, and all other identifying details that might help match children with parents or other family members. Many agencies are working with the Indonesian and Sri Lankan governments to coordinate these ambitious programs.

A key motivation for this effort is to protect children from exploitation and trafficking, which have long been a threat in the region. A few incidents of traffickers attempting to smuggle children out of the country have already been reported. Much of the information circulating has been rumors, but an Indonesian couple was arrested and charged with trying to smuggle children out by air, according to UNICEF, which issued a warning about the incident. Other reports of trafficking, such as a widely circulated story about an e-mail advertising children for adoption, have not been verified

"There are real reasons to be concerned," says Mike Kiernan, spokesman for Save the Children. Kiernan says that in the Sumatran city of Medan, a poverty-stricken region where families have few options, "the abduction and sale of children had already been a problem in the past." The good news is that government officials seem to be taking the threat seriously. Within days after the tsunami, the Indonesian government issued an edict barring people from leaving the country with Indonesian children under age 16. The ban is expected to last at least a month.

The question of adoption

International relief and adoption agencies are fielding numerous calls from Americans asking to take in children orphaned by the tsunami. But these adoptions aren't possible right now — for good reasons, experts say.

The concern about protecting children from exploitation extends to international adoption as well. Hard as it is to stomach, there is money to be made from babies, and there are those who want or need this money badly enough to treat children as commodities. This means that everyone involved in international adoptions should be concerned that legal procedures have been observed and children have been clearly designated as orphans before being put up for adoption, says lawyer and international adoption specialist Dawn Davenport. Overseas relief agencies urge Americans who wish to adopt to exercise similar caution. "I understand the impulse of people who want to help these children, and it's a generous one, but in situations like this, adoption may not be in the best interests of the child," says Save the Children's Mike Kiernan. "The child you adopt could well be a child whose parents are desperately looking for her."

Americans hoping to adopt orphaned children from the tsunami region will have to wait a while — probably at least two and a half years, when you count the time required to apply for and process an international adoption. The State Department says that such adoptions will not be possible until all tsunami refugees have been identified. Then, only children identified as legitimate orphans in need of international adoption will become available, and these only after their governments give the okay. And of course, identifying adoptable children isn't the priority right now — the priority is reuniting orphaned children with extended families or placing them within their communities. "It's always in the best interest of the child to keep them within their community and culture," Davenport says. And because so many parents lost their own children to the sea, experts say, it's likely they'll adopt those orphaned in the same way. Finally, some of the countries most affected by the tsunami — Indonesia and Sri Lanka in particular — don't have a legal history of being open to international adoption, and it's not clear if these policies will be revised. According to the State Department, it will take "many months" to sort the situation out.

For those who are willing to wait, Thailand and India are the best bets, says Davenport, because these countries already have active international adoption programs. And because the adoption screening process here in the United States involves a lengthy application process, those hoping to adopt should start now in order to be ready when children become available.

But if your heart has been opened to the idea of adopting, Davenport adds, why not take in a needy child from another region? "The world is filled with children who desperately need homes," she says. "While their situation may not be as dramatic, their histories are just as compelling."

Helping kids be kids again

In Banda Aceh, Indonesia, Education International reports that at least 2,000 teachers have been reported missing and more than half of the school buildings were destroyed by the tsunami, leaving 140,000 elementary school students and 20,000 high school students with nowhere to study. In Sri Lanka, 59 schools were destroyed and another 100 severely damaged, and 260 schools are being used as refugee camps, so they aren't available for students. Schools were also damaged or closed in Malaysia, Thailand, and southern India. Meanwhile, UNICEF is distributing "school-in-a-box" kits throughout the flooded regions, which include not only pencils, chalkboards, and notebooks, but math supplies such as geometry sets as well.

Reopening schools is an important part of getting kids back into a routine, says Terri Pease, the traumatic stress expert. "Anything you can do to help them feel like something is still the same, even if it's just having somewhere to go and someone there watching over them, helps them feel like things are someday going to go back to feeling normal."

For the same reason, those working in the refugee camps are creating "safe areas" for children with supervised programs of art activities, sports, and games. UNICEF field officers are training local volunteers to work with refugee children, many of whom are numbed by what they've been through. "Our staff can set up games, organize an art activity, anything that helps a kid be a kid," says Mike Kiernan of Save the Children. "This also gives them an opportunity to watch the children and identify the kids who seem to be most withdrawn or traumatized."

How do you help children profoundly traumatized by events so entirely out of their control? One of the best ways, Pease says, is by helping them articulate their feelings, often through play and storytelling. "They need to play out the trauma and create a new resolution for that trauma," says Pease, for example by playing that they're saving a doll "baby" from drowning.

Rituals are important too, as they can give children a sense of having control over their environment. Still, she says, those who work with the tsunami survivors have to realize that it'll be a slow process. "It's going to take a long time to heal wounds like these," Pease says. "These children may continue to relive these experiences in new ways throughout their lives." According to the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, children who live through a natural disaster may have nightmares or other sleep disturbances, may develop separation anxiety or other anxiety symptoms such as compulsive superstitions and behavior, and may feel the need to reenact that trauma over and over again.

What you can do

The magnitude of the tsunami disaster is so great that relief will be needed for a very long time to come, say those working in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, southern India, and other affected areas. "These were already very poor, marginal areas where people were living on the edge of survival," says Simon Ingram of UNICEF. "This has pushed whole communities over the edge." International relief agencies have committed to staying in the region for six months, but it's clear that the need for help will continue long after that.

Here are some of the charities working directly in the tsunami-affected region to benefit children. Note that most allow online donations:

[American Red Cross](#) One of the largest disaster relief funds. Airlifts food, medicine, shelters, and sanitation supplies

[AmeriCares](#) Disaster relief and humanitarian aid organization. Airlifts medical supplies.

[International Relief Teams \(IRT\)](#) San Diego, California-based charity. Sends medical supplies and medical personnel to oversee vaccination programs and clinics.

[Oxfam America](#) International development and relief agency. Helps countries set up sustainable, long-term programs to fight poverty.

[Save the Children USA](#) One of the oldest international agencies specializing in helping children. Has established

programs in remote tsunami-struck regions such as Banda Aceh, Indonesia.

UNICEF UNICEF, founded in 1947, has a long history of effective programs that help fulfill its mission of offering health, education, equality, and protection for every child

For more information, visit [Reliefweb](#), where you can find updated information on the relief projects that organizations have undertaken in tsunami-affected areas. For up-to-the-minute reports from the field, check out the [South-East Asia Earthquake and Tsunami Blog](#), also known as the SEA-EAT blog. In addition, [USAID](#) provides links to more than 80 American agencies, many of them affiliated with a particular religion, that are either working in the field or raising funds to support those who are.

One thing to keep in mind: It's best to donate directly to the charity of your choice, rather than responding to pleas from telemarketers, who keep a large percentage of the money you pledge. Also, beware of scams: Several states and consumer watchdog agencies have warned against fraudulent e-mails that solicit money for nonexistent charities, or ask for personal information such as credit card and social security numbers that can be used for identity fraud. The best way to avoid such ploys is, again, to donate directly to well-established charities. Finally, [Charity Navigator](#) offers a handy rating system that lets you see what percentage of your donations to various charities go directly to the recipients, as opposed to overhead and fundraising.

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