

Not My Fault: How to talk to your children about earthquakes

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard
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I have a colleague who wrote a book for young children about earthquake and tsunami preparedness. Lin Glen, a retired health educator and former preschool teacher, published “Sofie and Daniel Get Ready for Earthquakes” last year. It’s a sweet book aimed at elementary-aged children that addresses preparedness activities such as what to do in an earthquake, emergency kits and tsunami evacuation in a straight-forward, non threatening way. She had it reviewed by experts in both hazards and disaster communication.

Lin worked hard to distribute the book and make people aware of it. She has given numerous readings and presentations at schools museums and bookstores. She also approached some gift shops to consider the book. They rejected her request, stating that they were concerned that including such a book would make “guests feel as through they are in a dangerous place” and that it was more appropriate for residents who are already aware of our regional earthquake and tsunami threat.

Tourists are often the most vulnerable population in an emergency precisely because they aren’t aware of what to do, what the hazards are and how to respond. I spent two weeks in Chile after the February 2010 earthquake and tsunami. One of the findings of our team was the vulnerability of tourists who weren’t aware that the earthquake was a natural tsunami warning and had no idea that a minute of shaking meant time to head to high ground. I argue that a book like Lin’s is exactly what can help both visitors and residents alike. Once you get past the premise that we live in earthquake country, there is nothing scary in it at all. It gives you an easy how-to set of steps to help make you and you children safe.

Lin has also approached local elementary schools. Some were supportive and asked her to read the book to the class. The feedback was positive. But other schools denied her request, with some teachers worried that it might scare the students.

I understand the reluctance to talk about earthquakes with children. But avoiding a subject won’t prevent it from happening. Children have an incredible ability to detect those subjects that you are avoiding or make you

uncomfortable. The more you deflect and try to cover over topics, the more frightening it will become.

And, when it comes to knowing the right thing to do in an earthquake or tsunami, your children may be already way ahead of you. In California, all school children practice DROP, COVER and HOLD ON drills in their schools and most schools participate in the Great California ShakeOut drill every October. Schools in or near tsunami zones conduct tsunami drills as well. Humboldt and Del Norte County Schools use ShakeOut and Tsunami Awareness Week to talk about preparedness at home, at school and in the community. Practicing what to do beforehand develops the muscle memory to do the right thing when the earthquake occurs, AND REDUCES ANXIETY BEFORE, DURING AND AFTERWARDS. Earthquakes are a fact of life on the North Coast and sooner or later we will all experience one. Your children will be far less likely to be frightened if it is something they have talked about and drilled for both at school and at home.

I have thought a lot about age-appropriate disaster information for young children. When we were writing the book about Kamome, the Japanese boat carried by the tsunami to Crescent City nearly five years ago, foremost on my mind was using the sweet story of Kamome as a starting point for dialog on how knowledge and preparedness can help make you safe. I looked at the research of child psychologists and disaster communication specialists. We included some of their findings in a section in the back of the book for parents and educators.

- Practice “Drop, Cover, and Hold On” drills at home or at school. Counting out how long your pretend earthquake lasts is a great way to learn numbers and will help all of you stay calm in a real earthquake.
- Do an earthquake safety hunt in your home. Look for things that might fall or slide. Your children might spot things you haven’t noticed.
- Work with your child to put together a personal kit. Talk about what items should be in the kit and let your child choose a stuffed toy, a blanket or a favorite book.
- Live in a tsunami zone? Hold family tsunami evacuation drills. After you have done the drill a few times, let your children lead the way. The more you practice, the more familiar the process will become.
- When a real emergency occurs, limit media exposure. If children are going to watch television or video material, tape and preview it first to see if it is appropriate. Children (and adults) don’t benefit from graphic details or repeated exposure to disturbing images or sounds. The

aftermath of a crisis may be a good time to disconnect from all media and sit down together and talk as a family.

Including your children in planning for earthquakes, tsunamis, or other hazards will reassure them that your top priority is their safety and that there really are things all of you can do to make your family safer. And who knows, it just may be your son or daughter that leads you to safety when a real emergency unfolds.

Note: "Sofie and Daniel Get Ready for Earthquakes," and "The Extraordinary Voyage of Kamome" are available in local bookstores.

Lori Dengler is an emeritus professor of geology at Humboldt State University, an expert in tsunami and earthquake hazards. Questions or comments about this column, or want a free copy of the preparedness magazine "Living on Shaky Ground"? Leave a message at (707) 826-6019 or email Kamome@humboldt.edu <http://www.times-standard.com/opinion/20180207/lori-dengler-how-to-talk-to-your-children-about-earthquakes>