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# Aiding Young Children in Taiwan's Typhoon Disaster: How an NAEYC Interest Forum Takes Action

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The Asian Interest Forum was established and formally recognized by NAEYC in 2008. One of its missions is to help ensure optimal, culturally responsive environments around the globe for young children of Asian descent.

This column was written by Asia Interest Forum members. For further information, contact Shu-Chen Jenny Yen, California State University-Fullerton (syen@fullerton.edu); Sandy Baba, WestEd in San Jose (sbaba@wested.org); Ellen Junn, California State University-Fresno (ejunn@csufresno.edu).

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# Aiding Young Children in Taiwan's Typhoon Disaster

## How an NAEYC Interest Forum Takes Action

**WHEN DEVASTATING NATURAL DISASTERS STRUCK ASIA** last year—typhoons in Taiwan and the Philippines and an earthquake in Indonesia—members of the Asian Interest Forum (AIF) worried about basic living environments and the emotional needs of children in these regions. AIF decided to focus on helping victims of Morakot, the deadliest typhoon in Taiwan's recorded history.

Morakot took the lives of more than 619 people; 76 others are missing. Damages totaled \$3.3 billion. Huge amounts of rainfall triggered enormous mud slides and severe flooding throughout southern Taiwan. One mud slide buried the entire town of Xiaolin (Taiwan Government Information Office 2009). Of the 1,312 schools impacted by the typhoon, 18 were severely damaged and 1,335 students were transferred to other schools (Ministry of Education, Taiwan 2009).

As a result of this disaster, many Taiwanese children lost their parents, homes, and schools and became orphans. Other children were exposed to excessive disaster media coverage, with potential psychological harm. AIF members, concerned about the aftereffects on children and families, consulted disaster research on how best to support victims. AIF members were particularly interested in adapting and translating research and support strategies used in America to promote culturally appropriate, supportive practices for children and families in Taiwan.

This column shares some of the strategies and insights learned in working with parents and early childhood teachers about how to help young children from different cultures cope with natural disasters.

## AIF activates networks and support groups

Two AIF leaders, Shu-Chen Jenny Yen and Yafen Lo, based in the United States, quickly translated information related to coping with natural disasters into Chinese. They sent it to their colleagues in Taiwan, Shu-Fang Chen and Shu-Nu Yen, who worked with the Ministry of Education to disseminate the articles on the ministry's website.

As a result, more than a dozen Chinese newspapers and magazines reproduced their articles. They encouraged parents to watch their children for signs of emotional distress and to comfort them and give them reassuring explanations about the typhoon's origin. At the same time, AIF Asia colleagues worked with a major bookstore in Taipei to launch a book fair offering resources to help children and families cope with natural disasters. Parents and teachers received storybooks about children's feelings after a natural disaster and were encouraged to read the books with

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their children (see examples at [http://blog.eslite.com/mainstore\\_children/archives/621#more-621](http://blog.eslite.com/mainstore_children/archives/621#more-621)).

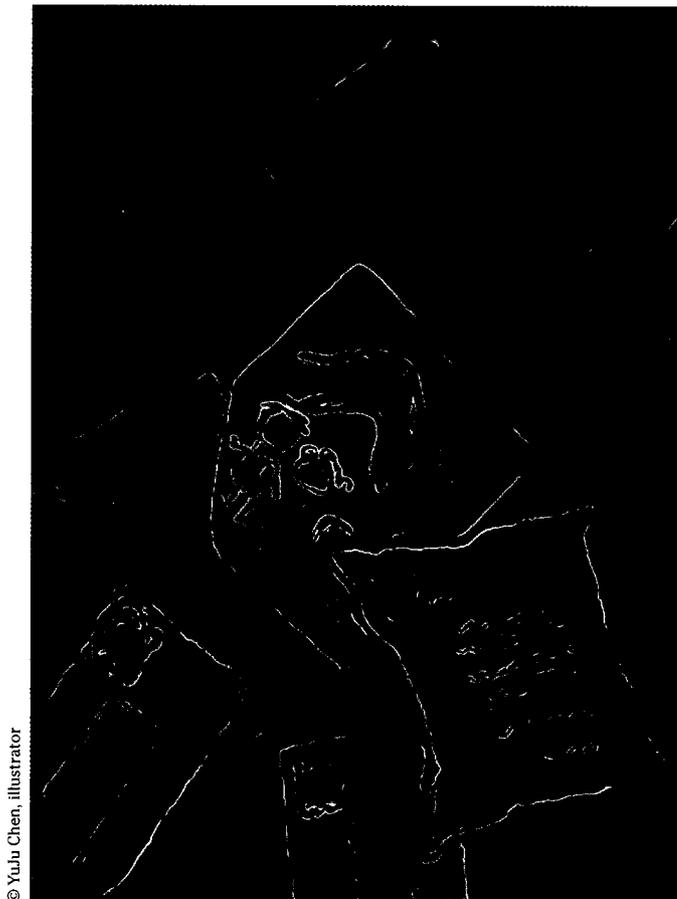
In addition, the Child Welfare League Foundation (CWLF) in Taiwan supported the project by posting the AIF work on its website and encouraging people to download the resource information. AIF leader Shu-Chen Jenny Yen flew to Taiwan and, with support from the CWLF, worked with local experts to lead trainings for early childhood teachers and volunteers on how to help children and families deal with the effects of the disaster.

### Using the personalized storybook approach with children

AIF advisors adopted a social story approach, which originated in the special education field, to write and illustrate a culturally appropriate storybook explaining to children the causes for the typhoon's damage to their schools and homes. Most important, the storybook reassured children of their safety and taught them how to cope with their fears. CWLF helped format the storybook in PowerPoint, made it available for free to the public, and disseminated the book widely to communities and schools of as many typhoon victims as possible.

The use of children's personal stories and pictures in storybook format has successfully helped to teach special education children certain basic skills, such as classroom routines (Briody & McGarry 2005). Early childhood classroom teachers have also used the social storybook to help children deal with social-emotional or behavior issues related to separation

from parents. Taiwan early childhood teachers encouraged parents to customize a social story for their children to help them face fears, challenges, or difficulties resulting from the typhoon disaster.



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### Being alert to cultural values and beliefs

Young children from different cultures show both similar and different psychosocial characteristics (Chen 2009). For example, Chinese and Korean toddlers typically display more fearful, vigilant, and anxious responses than do Australian, Canadian, and Italian toddlers when confronted with unusual, stressful situations (Rubin et al. 2006). These variations may be due to differences in cultural parenting styles and parent-child interactions. Chinese parents tend to emphasize more strongly such Chinese values as human malleability,

persistence, restraint of emotion, and parental authority (Chao 1994).

We paid attention in our AIF disaster response to Taiwanese parents' cultural value of restrained emotion and their tendency not to directly address children's fears, emotional reactions, and questions. We knew that ignoring or overlooking children's fears and questions could create a cycle of silence—children might think they shouldn't ask questions about the disaster because their parents don't talk about it. All our efforts included helping families understand that when children's fears remain, they may escalate later into emotional and behavioral problems.

### Young children's reactions and appropriate responses

Based on research, we summarized typical reactions to natural disasters by toddlers and young children in the United States. We launched a campaign to support Taiwanese parents in learning ways to talk to their children to reassure, comfort, and help them overcome physical, emotional, and psychological challenges—ways for adults to address children's fears (see "How to Support Children after a Disaster," p. 64).

### Outcomes and conclusions

AIF members worked with Taiwan's Ministry of Education, a national book publisher, the CWLF, and others to launch and maintain a campaign of providing proactive educational, research-based materials to help children and families cope with the typhoon disaster. Public feedback has been strong, positive, and promising.

The thousands of Taiwanese parents who bought books and read our storybooks to their children amazed and heartened us.

## How to Support Children after a Disaster

### Infants/toddlers

- Stay calm when around children, and speak in soft tones.
- Give children lots of attention, hugs, and physical contact.
- Maintain a predictable routine, at the very least for bedtime.
- Redirect children's aggressive behaviors into positive activities, such as reading books.

### Preschoolers

- Resume normal routines and favorite rituals, and keep children physically active.
- Provide children ample time with calm, loving, reassuring adults.
- Give children plenty of physical/verbal reassurance that they and you will be OK (but acknowledge their scared or upset feelings).
- Have children express how they feel via storytelling, play, or art.
- Encourage children to help one another and to improve the immediate environment.

### School-age children

- Encourage children to talk about their feelings by asking questions such as, "What worries you most?" Provide reassuring, realistic answers.
- Stress that this incident is rare, but avoid making false promises.
- Help children support others, such as by donating money or toys.
- Redirect children's attention to the positive, such as noting that lots of people are helping out and conditions are improving.
- Share selected, positive news stories.

Sources: Greenman 2005; Ippen, Lieberman, & Van Horn 2005; NACCRRA n.d.

For the AIF, this involvement/action was gratifying, exciting, and rewarding. Having a network, knowledge, and research skills made a difference. The thousands of Taiwanese parents who bought books and read our storybooks to their children amazed and heartened us.

The Asian Interest Forum members' network and contacts gave us the capability to meet an immediate need. Members responded quickly and efficiently, used research-based find-

ings, and customized a response that put developmentally and culturally appropriate materials in the hands of parents and families as they dealt with a natural disaster—all this in another country halfway around the world.

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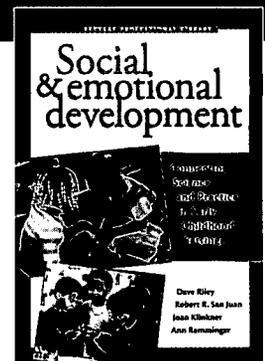
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