

Assembly Kit: Asia tsunamis

A primary education resource from the British Red Cross

This is one of a series of assembly kits intended for educational use. It provides pretty much all you need to start planning a school assembly. It is also intended more broadly for any session with children, particularly informal education outside the classroom or in personal, social and health education lessons.



It is natural, though, to want to address this subject in a school or year group assembly. It makes sense to come together as a community to think about those tens of hundreds of thousands of people, in a poor part of the world, whose lives have been suddenly devastated. Sharing thoughts and asking what we can do to help are important ways of coming to an understanding of what can seem incomprehensible.

This is an educational resource, not a fundraising one. Naturally people may well want to know how they can help - and for people in the UK sending money is one of the most valuable actions possible. The Disasters Emergency Committee is co-ordinating the fundraising appeal. The public can donate by telephoning 0870 60 60 900, donating online at www.dec.org.uk or by sending a cheque - made payable to DEC Tsunami Earthquake Appeal - to PO Box 999, London EC3A 3AA.

The assembly kit comprises a series of questions and answers, in which a narrator (voice one) gives responses to two particular types of concern. These are those of the despairer (voice two) who is overwhelmed by the scale of the catastrophe and the dreamer (voice three) who is moved to act but whose well-meaning suggestions are impractical or likely to be counter productive.

You may want to maintain this tension, using teachers or even children to take on speaking or “performance” roles. In this way, you can show in a compelling way how both despair and impracticality can be answered by the calm response of the active humanitarian. You may decide that it is not appropriate in your situation to present the topic in such a way. In this case, you can simply omit the despair and dreamer and use the dialogue text as notes for your own presentation or speech.

Do feel free to adapt in this way. Although the text sets out a workable session, it is not a rigid set of instructions. It is intended more as a menu plan, from which you can pick and mix, adapt and omit to suit the group and your situation. More ideas for developing and enhancing the performance appear as a series of add-ons following the main dialogues.

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Why are you doing this?

There is so much to talk about following what has been the most devastating natural disaster in recent years. Children will already have a lot on their minds. They will have heard and seen much, from television news and from conversations with adults. It is important to be clear about what your purpose is in raising the topic.

Again, this is likely to vary depending on your school or setting. But the more precise you are, the greater the learning will be. Here are a few suggestions:

- To help children recognise the role and complexity of the international relief effort, and to appreciate what kind of help is useful and what is less so.
- To provide children with a ballast against despair. Explain that, although the loss of life and human suffering is immense, the various humanitarian actions of individuals and organisations are making a difference to many of the survivors.
- To help children discuss, debate and develop their own understanding of topical issues, and how the media covers them.

You can get other ideas from the national curriculum objectives and outcomes at www.redcross.org.uk/educationtak

There is also an associated resource intended for use with pupils at Key Stages 3 and 4 or S1 – S4.

Performance

A powerful earthquake struck in the sea near Sumatra, Indonesia on Boxing Day morning. It triggered massive tidal waves (tsunamis) that swept into coastal villages and seaside resorts.

It is estimated that at least 150,000 people died, over 500,000 people are injured and 1.6 million have been displaced.

Eight countries were severely affected – Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, India, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Bangladesh. Other countries affected include Kenya, the Seychelles, Somalia and Madagascar.

VOICE ONE (active humanitarian):

No one can turn the clock back. We all wish the terrible earthquake and flood in the Indian Ocean had never happened. But it did. Our task now is to try to stop more lives being lost and to reduce the suffering of the survivors.

VOICE TWO (despairer): But where do we start? It seems so hopeless. Hundreds of thousands have been killed. People are without the basics of life. It is just too awful to think about.

VOICE ONE: We cannot help those who have died, but we can do a lot to help prevent further suffering.

VOICE TWO: What can anyone do to help those whose homes and families have been destroyed? Many were poor people who had very little in the first place. Now they have even less.

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Performance (contd.)

VOICE ONE: There is plenty that can be done. We can still save lives by bringing food, clean water and medicines to people who need them. We can help people find shelter. We can try to put them in touch with families they have been separated from.

All these things have been happening in the days following the earthquake. The process will continue for many months yet. Those experienced in disaster relief know what makes a difference to people's lives.

VOICE TWO: Such as?

VOICE ONE: The first thing is to try to stop anyone else being hurt or killed. That means finding safe shelters for survivors, and getting them food and water that is healthy and not infected.

Dealing respectfully with the bodies of those killed is important. So is stopping the spread of disease. That means arranging health services, clean water and systems of toilets that do not spread pollution.

Then there is search and rescue. Even now there still may be people who have survived but who are injured or trapped.

Another important role is bringing families together who have been separated by the tidal wave and floods. People are desperate to know if their loved ones have survived and where they are. But there is much confusion and communications are difficult.

All of this is about reducing human suffering. It is real practical help and is happening now - though there is a lot to do.

VOICE THREE (dreamer): If there are things that can be done, we ought to do them. Why are we hanging around? Why are people doing their ordinary jobs and living their lives as normal in Britain? Why don't they volunteer to go out to the disaster area and do something active to help? Why don't we take blankets and food to our local Red Cross shops and get them to send them to people who need them?

VOICE ONE: Sending blankets or food by plane can bring more problems. Putting donations on a plane and sending it is the easy part. The hard part comes on arrival. Who unloads the plane? Where do they take the blankets and food? They will need lorries and fuel, and a system for distribution. But those lorries and the people to drive them are already busy with other vital and urgent tasks, such as bringing water or taking people to health centres.

VOICE THREE: But surely some people could go out there? Plenty of people here are healthy and willing to help, and would be very happy to leave their lives here and go to do some good in Asia.

VOICE ONE: But think about it some more. You would need to eat when you got out there and somewhere to sleep. You would need some kind of vehicle to get around in. You would probably need a local guide and interpreter because you do not know the area or the languages.

It would take you ages to get to the people most in need and even longer to arrange proper help. In all this time you would be taking food, equipment and resources that might be scarce. You might get ill, because you are not used to the mosquitoes or do not have resistance to infections that local people have. That is not a help. You could quickly end up adding to the problems of the people, not reducing them.

VOICE THREE: But we must do something. What can we do?

VOICE ONE: Yes, we can support local people in their efforts. We can respond to what they ask us to do. Some outside help is useful. For example, technical experts and people experienced in other emergencies can advise or bring in special equipment. Teams of people skilled and equipped in water and sanitation systems, providing health care services, distributing aid, setting up communication systems have already arrived. We need to support this kind of assistance, much of it organised by the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and other aid agencies.

If we can encourage donations to make it happen, and ask our government to continue to support the rebuilding once the immediate emergency is over, we can make a difference.

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Music add-on

Music can provide a useful additional dimension to any assembly kit performance. You might discuss with children what kind of music might be appropriate to suit the dialogues. Do they feel music is suitable at all in discussing such an enormous disaster?

People in all cultures and throughout the ages have used music and songs to help provide comfort in times of trouble. Discuss any songs about disasters that children know. Can they imagine how such songs might help? Invite them to think about children who survived the Asia earthquake and flood disaster – these children would not want play and music and fun to stop. How might it be a comfort to them to have familiar melodies and rhythms?

Children could write and perform their own song based on what they know about the Asia disaster. Or they could devise their own version of a fundraising song, like the Band Aid one for Africa.

Reflection add-on

Think about other groups who are suffering and in need of help. Not long ago, the Band Aid single was launched to help raise funds for the people of Africa, particular in the Dafur region of Sudan. But since then, the situation has worsened, the fighting continues and many people are unable to return to their homes.

Last Christmas and New Year the focus was on the earthquake in the Iranian city of Bam. Talk about how easy it is to forget these areas of need. Reports of the tidal wave and floods have dominated the media. But the people in other parts of the world haven't suddenly had their problems solved. Some people in Bam are still living in tents. How does the international community prioritise different demands? How can we ensure that the people of Africa, and those suffering in other parts of the world, do not "drop off the agenda"?

Words and pictures add-on

The performance above does not contain any actual words or reports of people who saw the tidal wave and its aftermath. Newspapers, magazines and websites are a good supply of such eyewitness accounts and personal testimonies. Search for some that are appropriate to your group and add them to the assembly performance.

You can do the same with pictures, from printed sources or from the internet. If you have the technology, you might scan them in then project them as a backdrop to the performance.

Children might create their own art works - posters or montages - to demonstrate their feelings and understandings.

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Speaker add-on

Is there a local speaker available to meet young people and talk about some aspect of the situation in the disaster area? This can provide a vivid connection for children and also reassure them that, despite everything, normal life goes on. You will have to ask around to find someone available in your local community. Ideas might include:

- Someone from a local community group with a connection to Indonesia, Sri Lanka or another affected country.
- An academic from a university who is familiar with the area.
- A local representative of the British Red Cross or other agency who has experience or knowledge of the relief effort.

Your local newspaper may be able to prompt ideas - as they may have made contact with local people with personal connections during their coverage of the early days of the disaster.

Follow-up add-on

Inevitably, over time, the Asia tsunami will cease to be headline news, and other topics will fill the media. Plan for a follow up event after a suitable interval so that children do not have the experience of an intensely focused session followed by total silence.

You might look at how the rebuilding process is going, picking up on interesting aspects of the reconstruction. You might focus on the lives of survivors and imagine what they are doing now and how their lives have changed.

Pick up on themes that emerged during or after the performance. Revisit aspects of the performance that have moved on or changed because of events since. Have you done any extra work since the performance - based perhaps on the speaker or music add-ons? Incorporate what the children have done and learned into the follow-up event. Don't stop with one follow-up. Make it a regular series.

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