

UNICEF NZ (UN Children's Fund)

Media Release

Psycho-social training aims to help Samoan children recover from tsunami faster

Apia, Friday 9 October 2009. – A training programme for Samoan community support volunteers is helping tsunami-affected families provide the support their children need.

The 29 September tsunami killed 137 people – more than half of them children -- and injured several hundred, according to official figures. Up to 15,000 people have been affected, 9,000 of them children, with 6,500 people displaced.

The UN Children's Fund has partnered with Save the Children to run training sessions for Samoan support workers who are providing social support to families affected by the disaster.

UNICEF Child Protection Officer, Laisani Petersen, says that it is normal for children to be distressed after a major disaster and it is essential that social and psychological issues are faced at an early stage after the tsunami.

“Emergency situations, like the tsunami, can turn children's lives upside down and rip away their sense of security and stability.

“Exposure to loss of loved ones, disruption of normal routines such as attending school, displacement, witnessing stressed family members, and loss of recreational activities all place significant strain on children. The rubble and broken glass produced by the tsunami, for example, makes it dangerous for children to resume normal play.

“Children experience and respond to traumatic events differently, yet with the right support, the majority will be able to overcome these difficult experiences.

“Parents may be worried about changes in their children's behaviour after the tsunami, such as not talking, staring into space, or regressing, but with the right support, they will be able to help their children recover from the trauma of the tsunami.”

Ms Petersen says that initial training has reached about 50 community support volunteers, some of whom are already working with tsunami-affected families, while others will deploy from next week. The training includes international best practice around child protection and contextualising child support principles appropriate to Samoan culture.

Save the Children Child Protection in Emergencies Advisor, Amalia Fawcett, seconded from Plan International Australia, says that the training follows a “strength-based” model, where support for children is seen as a natural process.

“Communities usually have the resources and resilience to support their own emotional well-being, but may need some additional assistance in the early stages of disaster recovery.

“Families can often very effectively tap into existing support networks such as extended families and their church.”

UNICEF and Save the Children have been working closely on the training with the Samoan Ministry of Women Community and Social Services and the Ministry of Health Mental Health Unit.

More information

David Youngmeyer

Communications Manager

UNICEF NZ

(currently based in Apia, Samoa)

Cell: +64 21 851 263

Cell: +685 772 1749