

# The healing power of play

*Despite the tsunami's devastation, the children of Sri Lanka send a message of hope* BY ANNE STEWART, PH.D.

Looking out of the window of the van as we travel southward, I am overwhelmed with both the beauty of Sri Lanka's coastal scenery and the magnitude of the devastation. I arrived in Sri Lanka in early February in response to the tsunami that struck South Asia and parts of Africa on Dec. 26, 2004. Scientists report that the earthquake that generated the tsunami was 23,000 times as powerful as the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. In Sri Lanka alone, the death toll was more than 43,000 mothers, fathers and children; family, friends and neighbors.

I had come to Sri Lanka with others from the Association for Play Therapy to provide play-based interventions to children traumatized by the tsunami. I had left my home in Harrisonburg and my psychology classes at JMU to come to Sri Lanka because I believe the welfare of each child is connected to the well-being of all children everywhere and because I believe I can help.

Even after the tsunami, Sri Lanka is a paradise. As our small team of mental health professionals continues to head south from Colombo, however, the devastation soon appears. The road, running parallel to the beach, becomes lined with rubble — pile after pile of bricks, cement and decaying tree trunks. The piles are dot-

ted, poignantly, with colorful tangles of clothing. We also see these bright spots of clothing high in the trees. We are told that these are bright saris, stripped from the women and girls during the tsunami. While we silently offer our hope that the women and girls who once wore the clothing are safe, we know it is not likely that they survived. Unexpectedly, I begin to question the logic of being there to play in the midst of this disaster. I feel unmoored and adrift.

Almost three hours south of Colombo, our team reaches the fishing village of Weligama, lying right next to the sea. The van slows to a stop. The Indian Ocean is about 20 yards to my right. A broken boat lies on the beach amid piles of debris. On the left is a desolate scene, more rubble and a blue tarp suspended in the breeze. I do not see any people and am not sure why we are stopping. We are told, "This is our camp. The children are expecting you."

As we step out of the van and walk across the road, a young woman approaches us with a baby on her hip. She greets us with a head shake and smile. Within seconds, 40 children, from 2 to 16 years old, appear. The woman explains that she is the teacher for the children and that the children would like to perform for us. A young girl performs the "bangle" dance, gracefully posturing her small hands and then tapping her wrists together. Of course,



As a welcome to the play therapy team and the author (inset), the teens of Weligama perform a traditional Sri Lankan dance as younger children clap and sing along.

she has no bangles. Three teenaged girls then do a traditional dance while the other children clap and sing songs to accompany them. Their pleasure and enjoyment in one another are clear.

Then, surprisingly, the children scurry into a large circle and motion for us to join them. Their faces have the same impish looks we have all seen on our own children. Giggling mischievously, the children look at one another and raise one arm. In unison they sing, 'You put your right hand in, you put your right hand out.' We laugh, and almost cry, in disbelief. *The Hokey Pokey!* These children had been taught *The Hokey Pokey* by an earlier team and practiced it in English for our visit. These children without homes, full of grief and loss, had been getting ready to surprise us. Here by the sea, with these children, I understand again the resilience of children and the important contribution of play in changing a legacy of destruction and loss to a future of hope.

Our team works directly with children and family members who survived the tsunami, and consults with teachers and caregivers. We visit one to three sites each day, seeing children who resided in orphanages and tent camps. In most instances, the camps are near their previous home community and very close to the sea.

The children approach the team curious and shy, and very quickly join us in our play activities. Our team includes our fellow playmates, a.k.a. translators, Surangani and Kumari, who help us identify and engage with the groups' leaders, and then have a playful introduction to the children, usually with a "Hello" song. We find the children also enjoy having a time to perform for us, often singing songs they composed about the losses they had sustained.

All of the play activities we engage in with the children are based on research regarding the components of effective treatments for child survivors of trauma. These were the same kind of activities I had done in Boston with children healing from the trauma of abuse and neglect or from witnessing domestic violence. These were the same activities I shared with children in Bosnia, Cambodia, and Mozambique and Vietnam to heal from the trauma of living

## 'Nature is a gift for us. We were proud to have such a beautiful gift. But today the situation is different. It is so sad.'

DINANI NISANSALA, 14 years old

with landmines. The very same activities I use with children in Virginia. Children healing from the trauma of witnessing the drowning of a classmate. Children healing from the trauma of 9/11.

Such play-based activities help normalize reactions, promote positive coping and self-soothing, correct misattributions, encourage social support and instill hope. Translated (literally and figuratively) into action, these factors are incorporated into culturally congruent puppet plays, songs and expressive arts and experiential activities. For example, guided by information from the orphanage or camp leader, a puppet play might have characters displaying a range of trauma-related symptoms: trouble sleeping, not wanting to be with friends, only wanting to search for lost parents or friends. In play, the characters, with the children's suggestions, explore a variety of ways to feel better.

A particularly powerful activity is "Rebuild your Village," in which the children are asked to work together to create a new village using the materials at hand. In a few minutes the children gather materials and collaboratively construct a village to their liking, replete with a temple, homes, a school, bridges, roads and, of course, a playground. In the middle of this destruction, the children were ready to create.

We also have the opportunity to conduct training. We discuss the rationale for our work and provide experiential training in the play activities for 25 teachers and community development officers. We first describe our approach with the municipal officials and receive assurances that it is just what the participants are expecting and desire. However, a short way into the program, we notice some women who seem quite shy and perhaps embarrassed. Concerned that we are

violating some cultural or religious norm, we ask the official to make sure our group is comfortable and satisfied with the training. After consulting with the participants, she approaches us and announces that "the women would very much like you to repeat everything, so they can learn it more thoroughly while you are here." What a delightful surprise. It is a deeply gratifying training experience and a tender and tearful parting as we genuinely tell the women, "From our hearts, to your hearts, we wish you well." And we continue to, every hour, every day.

There is special joy in working with these adults and children. I want to tell them everything will be all right, but everything is not all right. Nor is it all right with many children around the world. In the world, there are mountains of despair. The landscape is littered with all types of debris, with the remnants of broken families and broken communities. Children's lives that are broken by violence, by oppression, by hopelessness. But despite the debris, despite all our concerns, fears and all that we see, I see a message of hope in Sri Lanka.

I find the devastation of the communities is more than matched by the grace, wisdom and resilience of the children and families we meet. Their pain and hope is reflected in words Dinani Nisansala, a young teenage girl shares: "Whenever I think about the day of December 26th, I feel like crying.... My friends, my relatives lost their lives. The sound of weeping, crying and shouting are still in my ears. ... I don't hate the sea. I will not be able to get anything back by blaming nature, so I will not weep by thinking about what I lost. I wish to live with what I gained."

I went to Sri Lanka because I believe how we care for our children, all our children, is a measure of the state of our humanity. I went to Sri Lanka because just one caring adult — here, now, anywhere — can make a positive difference in the life of a child. ❧

**About the Author:** Anne Stewart, Ph.D., is a graduate psychology professor and licensed clinical psychologist in Virginia. She is a trainer, supervisor and playful practitioner of play and family therapy.

Learn more about the author's work in Sri Lanka at [www.psyc.jmu.edu/gradpsyc/srilanka.html](http://www.psyc.jmu.edu/gradpsyc/srilanka.html) and support her work with a gift to the Children and Family Foundation at [www.jmu.edu/development/how\\_to\\_gift/wm\\_preview/give\\_now.shtml](http://www.jmu.edu/development/how_to_gift/wm_preview/give_now.shtml)

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