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Children, Stress, and Natural Disasters

A Guide for Teachers

Introduction

The purpose of this guide is to inform teachers of how natural disasters can affect children's behavior and performance in the classroom, and what teachers can do to help children cope. By reading this guide, teachers will:

- Have a better understanding of what children may have experienced as a result of a disaster, and what the short- and long-term consequences of these experiences might be
- Be able to identify how children commonly respond to disasters and other stressful situations, and how these responses may influence children's classroom behavior and academic performance
- Have a better understanding of how they might be able to help children cope with the aftermath of a natural disaster

What Children May Be Experiencing

The experiences children have as a result of a disaster depend on the kind of disaster it was, whether there was forewarning and time to prepare, the extent of the impact on a community, and how much direct exposure children or their families might have had. However, **there are two basic kinds of experiences that children who live through a disaster have: (1) the trauma of the disaster event itself; and (2) the changes and disruptions in day-to-day living caused by the disaster.**

The Trauma of the Event

The most obvious experience that children might have during a disaster is experiencing or witnessing a frightening event or series of events. These might include the destruction of homes, property, or personal possessions; being personally injured or faced with physical danger; or witnessing the death, injury, or pain of others. This is sometimes more common in disasters that are sudden or unanticipated, such as earthquakes, tornadoes, or flash floods. However, even anticipated disasters (e.g., hurricanes) can be frightening for children. These disaster events are often short lived, however, other disasters (e.g., flooding) can often last a long time. In both cases, disasters often set off a chain of events that can cause changes in day-to-day living conditions and result in long-term difficulties.

Disruptions to Daily Life

Life might not return to normal quickly following a disaster. There may be **changes in living conditions** that cause changes in day-to-day activities -- including strains in the relationships between family members or between friends, changes in expectations that family members have for each other (along with changes in responsibilities) These **disruptions in relationships, roles, and routines** can make life unfamiliar or unpredictable, which can be unsettling or sometimes frightening for children.

Changes to living conditions that can cause difficulty include:

- Having a home destroyed
- Having to be relocated when a home is destroyed or damaged. This might mean:
 - Living in temporary housing or with relatives or friends; possible crowding and tensions
 - Moving to a new community, going to a new school; having to adjust to a new environment and make new friends
- Being separated from family members
- Financial pressures from unemployment or loss of family farm or business

Changes that disrupt relationships, roles, and routines include:

- Not having parents physically or emotionally available following the disaster (because they are busy cleaning up or are preoccupied, distracted, or distressed by disaster- related difficulties)
- Being expected to take on more adult roles (watch siblings, help with cleanup efforts, listen to parents' concerns and worries, etc.)
- Not being able to spend time with friends or participating in activities, groups, hobbies, interests, or routines that children usually have (e.g., summer vacation, trips, etc.)

Pile-up of Stressors and Long-term Strains

The stresses of the disaster and its consequences can begin to "pile up". Little hassles become difficult to deal with when there are other problems that also have to be faced. Difficulties that *parents* face can sometimes "filter down" and affect children in indirect ways. These pile-ups may lead to strains that continue long after the physical signs of destruction have been cleared away. The changes that can have the biggest effect on children are parental adjustment problems or strains in family relationships that may linger after the disaster, including:

- Increased alcohol or drug use by family members
- Increased conflict or violent behavior between family members, or between family members and others
- Decreased physical and emotional availability of parents
- Loss of children's social network or the opportunity to participate in normal routines and activities.

Many of the negative effects of a disaster may be due to longer- term strains that were caused or exacerbated by the disaster. These daily strains can have a bigger impact on children's adjustment than the experience of the event itself. In other words, disruptions caused by disasters may:

- add to difficulties children might have in handling the trauma of a disaster event,
- create additional difficulties for children that have nothing to do with the traumatic event,
- reduce the kinds of resources children have available to cope with stress.

Children's Responses to Disasters

Children react to stress in different ways, however, there are some common behaviors that you might see in the classroom as a result of a disaster or disaster-related disruptions. Children of different ages respond to stressful circumstances in different ways. For example, regressive behavior is more likely among younger children (under 7 years), while acting out and withdrawal is more common among older children. The main thing to remember, however, is that the best indicator of distress is **unusual changes in behavior or appearance**. Some common responses to disasters include:

Signs of Distress

- Regressive behavior (acting like a younger child): thumbsucking; loss of toilet training skills; separation difficulties (crying, fussing, or clinging when parents leave); difficulty in making transitions; increased whining, dependency, or "neediness"
- disaster-related fears (rain, thunder, wind, etc.)
- difficulty sleeping, nightmares
- lack of emotional expression
- looking sad or depressed, crying
- being unusually quiet or withdrawn
- apathy, being uninterested in things that were usually enjoyed
- complaints of headaches, stomachaches, or other symptoms of illness
- acting out, aggression, disobedience, talking back, destructiveness, stealing
- outbursts of anger, irritability, sudden changes in mood
- distractibility, poor concentration, attention problems, restlessness, daydreaming
- lethargy, fatigue, sleeping in class
- increased absences or tardiness
- declining school performance
- changes in relationships with peers (suddenly spending a lot more or a lot less time with friends)

Although symptoms may result from trauma caused by direct exposure to disaster events, they may also be due to disruptions in relationships, roles, and routines caused by the disaster. It is important to note that while symptoms displayed by children may be a response to a disaster or disaster-related disruptions, they may also reflect conditions that were present *before* the disaster. The stresses and strains caused by a disaster may have revealed or exacerbated pre-existing difficulties.

Who is at Risk?

In general, children who are most likely to be affected by disasters are those who:

- directly experienced or had the greatest exposure to the disaster (suffered an injury, had a family member die or get injured, felt they were in physical danger; or witnessed a frightening event)
- experienced major disruptions in relationships (especially within the family), roles, and routines that result in long- term changes and strains
- had psychological or academic difficulties prior to the disaster

Identifying Children Who May Need More Help

Although many of the symptoms listed above are considered normal responses to stress, children should be referred to mental health professionals for evaluation if:

- symptoms signal a very unusual change in behavior or appearance, and persist for more than 2 weeks
- several different kinds of symptoms are seen (e.g., appears sad, complains of headaches, *and* sleeps in class)
- symptoms are seen in different settings (in different classes, outside of school, at home, with peers)
- the child threatens or actually tries to harm himself
- the child shows signs of abuse or neglect

Any concerns or suspicions should be discussed with others on the school staff before implementing the school's referral procedure.

Implications for Teachers

The disruptions that children experience, and their possible reactions mean that:

- Some children may not be ready to learn -- emotional distress may get in the way of academic progress.
- Certain symptoms or learning difficulties may persist for a long time, especially if children are reacting to long-term family disruptions or strains
- Some of the effects of long-term disruptions may not surface immediately; problems may not surface until weeks, months, or even a year following the disaster
- Classroom management may be more difficult; teachers may have to deal with regressive, withdrawn, or disruptive behavior
- Teachers may experience more than the usual stresses and strains in dealing with distressed children

Teachers may face even greater strains if they are having disaster-related difficulties of their own

What Teachers Can Do

Teachers can help children following a disaster by understanding what children may have experienced, recognizing signs of distress, and knowing when to refer children for additional help. They can also help children cope with difficult situations by providing an atmosphere of safety, security, and support, conducting classroom activities that may facilitate coping, and by taking care of themselves.

Providing Safety, Security, and Support

In times of uncertainty, children need someone, someplace, or something they can rely on for safety, security, and fulfillment. They need a place where they know that they matter and what they do matters; where their actions have consequences; where they can depend on people and count on things happening in predictable ways. Teachers can provide this kind of atmosphere by:

- Being willing to listen and respond to verbal and nonverbal cues
- Noticing and acknowledging things about children, keeping track of and commenting on what's going on in their lives
- Giving children extra reassurance, support, and encouragement
- Providing structure, stability, and predictability. Having predictable routines, clear expectations, consistent rules, and immediate feedback

Children might need extra understanding and patience, but this does not mean excessively "coddling" children and "letting them get away with murder". In fact, teachers should maintain their expectations for behavior and performance and should not be afraid of using discipline. At the same time, however, they should be prepared to provide extra support and encouragement.

Let children talk about experiences and express fears and concerns. Let them know that it is OK and quite natural to feel angry, sad, or frightened, and that talking about these feelings will make them feel better. You might share your own feelings. Activities that let them hear how others feel will help them realize that their feelings are not bad or unusual.

Providing Classroom Activities that Facilitate Coping

There are some things that you can do in the classroom to help children cope with difficulties. A companion guide, [School Activities for Children](#) suggests activities that may help children prepare for or cope with disasters. These suggestions include:

- Providing activities that encourage children to share experiences and express feelings of fear or concern
- Conducting study projects or multidisciplinary units focused on learning about disasters. Students can learn and apply math, science, and language skills in exploring the causes and consequences of natural disasters.
- Introducing units on disaster preparedness or health and safety to give students a sense of competence, confidence, and control in being able to handle disasters in the future
- Encouraging service projects that provide students with an opportunity to contribute to their family, school, and community.

Taking Care of Yourself

You may find that helping affected children creates stresses for you as well. You may also be dealing with disaster-related difficulties in your own life. It's important for you to recognize your own stresses, strains, and difficulties. You will be a greater help to children (and your colleagues) if you can acknowledge your own experiences and feelings.

- Acknowledge your own feelings of anger, frustration, fear, sadness, or helplessness
- Talk to someone (friends, relatives, or colleagues) about what you are going through. You might also consider joining (or starting) a support group for others who may be going through something similar
- Become aware of how you usually cope with stress
- Consciously try to manage stress by using relaxation techniques, exercise, "time off" for fun or enjoyable activities, and looking for the positive consequences of the situation.
- Don't be afraid to seek "professional" help. Therapists and counselors can be very helpful during tough times, even if you don't think you have "serious" problems.

<http://www.ag.uiuc.edu/~disaster/teacher/csndresx.html>

Children, Stress, and Natural Disasters: School Activities for Children

Introduction

There are a number of different kinds of activities that teachers can use in a classroom to prepare for or recover from a disaster. In general (and depending on the age of students), teachers can:

- **Conduct classroom activities that can help children cope** with the trauma of a disaster or its aftermath by sharing their experiences and expressing their fears or concerns.
- **Conduct study projects or multidisciplinary units focused on disasters** as a way of integrating learning across the curriculum. Students can learn and apply math, science, and language skills in exploring the causes and consequences of natural disasters.
- **Introduce units on disaster preparedness** or health and safety to give students a sense of competence, confidence, and control in being able to handle disasters in the future
- **Organize or encourage service projects** that give children the opportunity to use their skills and to help their family, school, or community prepare for or recover from natural disasters.

The process of expressing feelings and experiences, learning about the causes of disasters, and preparing for future events can give children a sense of understanding, coherence, and control over things that seem chaotic and or confusing. Doing meaningful work and helping others during a disaster might also give them a sense of mastery or keep them from feeling helpless and victimized.

In this guide, we provide suggestions for activities that can be used in the classroom and include information on resources that can be obtained at little or no cost.

<http://www.ag.uiuc.edu/~disaster/teacher/csndactx.html>

Classroom Activities to Help Children Express Feelings

Giving children outlets for them to share their experiences and express their concerns and fears can sometimes make them feel better. The process of expressing or **diffusing** these feelings can be helpful for several reasons:

- Expressing fears or concerns can sometimes relieve tension or anxiety,
- Telling and retelling their story may help children create a sense of order, coherence, or control over events that seem chaotic, confusing, or overwhelming,
- Hearing other children's stories may help them realize that they are not alone in their fears or concerns,
- The interactions between children and teachers, or between children that come with the sharing of experiences or feelings can build a sense of security and trust.

The California Marin County Community Mental Health Services and the Santa Cruz County Mental Health suggest these activities:

Preschool and Elementary School Activities

1. Making toys and materials that encourage play reenactment of children's experiences and observations during a disaster can be helpful to them in integrating experiences. These might include fire, rescue, and dump trucks, ambulances, bulldozers, or building blocks. Play with puppets or dolls could also help children ventilate feelings about what has occurred. (Preschool, Early Elementary)
2. Physical activity can be a good way to relieve tension and anxiety for children as well as adults. Physical contact during times of stress can give them a sense of security. Games that include physical activity and contact may be helpful. Some examples are (Preschool, Early Elementary):
 - Ring around the Rosie
 - London Bridge
 - Duck, Duck, Goose
3. Having a child draw a picture about a disaster is a good way to initiate expression in some children. You can ask children to draw whatever comes to their minds, or you could give them a question or topic to draw about. Talking about the picture later with a teacher or in a small group may allow them to vent their experiences and to discover that others share their fear (See #7 below). (Preschool, Elementary).
4. "Short stories" written (Elementary) or dictated (Preschool, Early Elementary) to an adult about their experience of the disaster can help a child verbalize fears as well as well as get back in touch with previous positive associations about a disruption.
5. A group mural or collage on topics like "what happened to your house (or school or neighborhood)" or "when the big storm hit" followed by small group discussions may also be helpful (see #7 below). (Preschool, Elementary)

6. Help or encourage children to develop skits or puppet shows about what happened in the disaster. Encourage them to include anything positive about the experience as well as those aspects that were frightening or disconcerting. (Elementary)
7. Students can draw, write, or talk about the thing they best remember, or respond to questions or topics such as:
 - What happened after the storm hit?
 - How did you help your family during or after the disaster?
 - How could you help your family if you were in another disaster?
 - Did anything good or positive happen because of the disaster? Did you learn anything from what happened to you?

Although group discussions are a good vehicle for validating children's feelings about their experiences, it is important to end the discussion on a positive note by focusing on things that promote a sense of security, mastery, or preparedness. This may come from students themselves, and teachers can reinforce or elaborate on these points. Some positive outcomes might include:

- Feeling closer to family and friends
 - Meeting new friends or caring adults
 - Learning new skills or getting a sense of responsibility, strength, or mastery
 - Having the community pull together to deal with the crisis
 - Seeing that people want to help
8. Encourage class activities in which children can *organize* or *build* projects (scrapbooks, replicas, etc.) to give them a sense of mastery and a chance to organize what may be chaotic and confusing events. (Elementary)
 9. Encourage "disaster" games in which children set rules and develop outcomes which can allow them to develop feelings of mastery over events. (Elementary)
 10. Use coloring books (Preschool, Early Elementary) or other books (Elementary) about disasters to stimulate children's drawing, writing, or talking about their experiences.

The American Red Cross publishes a series of coloring books designed for use by children ages 3 - 10 and an adult or older youth "helper" who can discuss the child's feelings about disasters and the recovery process. Each book is also available in Spanish. Titles include:

- After the Flood Coloring Book (ARC 2204)
Despues de la unundacion Libro de colores (ARC 2204S)
- After the Storm Coloring Book (ARC 2206)
Despues de la tepested Libro de colores (ARC 2206S)
- After the Tornado Coloring Book (ARC 2205)
Despues del tornado Libro de colores (ARC 2205S)
- After the Earthquake Coloring Book (ARC 2201)

Other books that can be used are listed in a [bibliography of children's literature on disasters](#). Additional material can be found in a [list of resources from the American Red Cross](#).

Service Projects

Helping others or contributing to disaster recovery or preparedness work in meaningful ways can be a good way to help overcome feelings of helplessness or frustration that is common among disaster victims. Depending on their ages, there are a variety of things students can do to actively contribute to their family, school, and community. For example, teachers could:

1. Conduct a class discussion or support a class project on how students might contribute to a community recovery or preparedness effort. It is important to help them develop concrete and realistic ways to be of assistance. Depending on their age, try as much as possible to have them come up with ideas and/or work at organizing the effort so that it is "their" project.

For example, eighth graders in Austin Middle School (Texas) surveyed residents who might need additional help in the event the town needed to be evacuated because of flood. They designed a special placard that residents could place into their windows if they needed special assistance to evacuate.

2. Students might also perform some kind of service for younger children in their school, or in area childcare facilities. For example, they could create and perform puppet plays on the themes of coping with disaster.
3. Finally, students can organize projects to support students or communities in other areas who might have been struck by disaster. For example, using lessons learned from their own experience of being helped, students can figure out ways of helping that would be most useful for others their age.

<http://www.ag.uiuc.edu/~disaster/teacher/csndactx.html>

Examples of Activities That Promote the Sharing of Experiences and Expression of Feelings

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Overview

*This section was adapted and reprinted from: **Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). How to Help Children After a Disaster: A Guidebook for Teachers. FEMA 219/November 1991.** The original resource was developed by a team of educators and child mental health professionals from Alameda County, California. Additional material has been developed by Lynne Borden and Aaron T. Ebata, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Illinois at Urbana- Champaign.*

The Process of Diffusing

Experiencing a disaster might cause some children to show a variety of symptoms of distress or problems. Teachers can help these children by assisting them in expressing their experiences and feelings. This is called **DEFUSING**.

DEFUSING is a supportive, personalized, safe *interactive* process between individuals in a small/or large group. The teacher provides clarity and complete expression of the event/experiences. It can be emotional. It can help children to develop coping skills and heal. Why encourage expression?

- Expression often relieves tension, fear, or anxiety
- Expression can help children "create a story" or "create meaning" out of an event and may give them a sense of coherence or control over their lives or the events in their lives
- Expression allows children to make their needs known to others

The defusing process is most effective when you focus on the disastrous event(s) in this sequence:

1. General events
2. Event-specific experiences
3. Personal experiences

EXAMPLE: If the event was a hurricane, then do the following:

1. **General:** talk/draw/write about disasters in general: "Hurricanes happen when...", "Floods happen when...", etc.
2. **Event-Specific:** talk/draw/write about the local disaster you just experienced.
3. **Personal:** talk/draw/write about each person's personal experience in that disaster.

NOTE: This process needs to conclude with quiet, reflective time.

Remember! You can use this after ANY KIND OF DISASTER.

Methods and Techniques

In using the General to Specific Approach, many methods and activities may be effective. Three suggested methods/techniques to use in your class to help defuse children after a disaster are:

1. THE TALKING METHOD
2. THE DRAWING METHOD
3. THE WRITING METHOD

Examples of each of these methods are presented later in this guide.

Questions and Themes

There are some LEADING QUESTIONS and suggested themes you can use to help children to express themselves in the talking method, the drawing method, or the writing method:

- How have you gotten through rough times before?
- What would you do differently if it happened again?
- How did you help others? How would you help next time?

As the teacher, you might think of more leading questions to ask the children. Be sure that your questions are OPEN - ENDED, which means that they can *not* be answered by a "Yes" or "No" only. Open-ended questions facilitate verbal expression. Most of these questions would be helpful at any time after a disaster/event, from one day following, to one or more years later. *Remember to use the previous questions as the basis for the activities that follow.*

Here are some questions/themes that can be used with either the talking, drawing, **or** writing methods:

- Where were you when it (the disaster/event) happened?
- What were you doing?
- Where were your friends?
- Where was your family?
- What was your first thought when it happened?
- What were you thinking during it?
- What did you see?
- What changed? (Include lifestyle/*living conditions*!)
- What did you hear?
- What sound did it make?
- What did you smell?
- What did you do after it?
- What did you "lose"? (Misplaced or broken, destroyed, etc.)
- How did you feel?
- What did other people around you do (during, after)?
- What happened to the animals around you? (Pets, too)
- What do you do differently since the (disaster/event)?
- How do you feel now?
- What makes you feel better?

The Talking Method

Materials

Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day, by Judith Viorst

Procedure

1. FIRST, introduce talking as a way of:
 - o expressing thoughts and ideas
 - o letting people know your feelings

Talking should be presented to the child as an OPTION for expression, *not* as a required activity!

2. Explain that we all have had bad days. Ask students if they have ever had a bad day.
3. Read the story aloud to the students, then discuss using the following questions to get things going.
 - o Why was Alexander's day so very bad?
 - o What could Alexander have done to change his day?
 - o Have you ever had a very bad day?
 - o Can you tell me about your very bad day?
 - o How did your very bad day make you feel?
 - o What is the worst day you can remember?
 - o Can you tell me how you felt that day?
 - o Do you think other people have bad days?
 - o Do adults have bad days?
 - o Why did Alexander want to move to Australia?
 - o Have you ever thought about moving away?
 - o How did you feel when you thought about moving away?

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Help students to see that everyone has bad days and some days are just more difficult.

Remember to use previous questions to help lead these activities: A QUESTION CAN BECOME A THEME FOR A DISCUSSION.

Additional Activities

- Child tells a story - allow metaphors
- Puppets "tell" or "live" a story
- Have an open discussion - using previous questions; ask for volunteers to begin with. . . talk "general to specific."
- Use photos, drawings, etc., to facilitate discussions
- Use video prior to discussion to get it going
- Create a skit, play, or do role-playing, related to the disaster. (Provide "dress-up" clothes if available, including uniforms if possible to represent emergency workers seen during the disaster, etc.)
- Do "show and tell" related to the event
- Inform/educate the children about the event to make it less threatening to talk/act about. Make it "familiar."
- Other written materials you could use to facilitate discussion:
 - Magazine articles
 - Newspaper articles
 - Picture Books

Cowardly Clyde, by Bill Peet

Oh, the Places You'll Go, by Dr. Seuss

- Novels

Little House on the Prairie, by Laura Ingles Wilder

The Cay, by Theodore Taylor

Remember to keep yourself in a facilitative/guiding role, *not* in a role of "control" of the discussions/stories, etc. Reassure the children by verbally acknowledging and "normalizing" their experiences.

The Drawing Method

Materials

Chalk, crayons or oil pastels and two or four 19"x 24" sheets paper per student.

Procedure

INTRODUCTION:

Introduce drawing as:

- another way of "talking," (but silently)
- a means of expression
(Point out that some people express themselves by talking, some by singing, some by dancing. . . some by *drawing!*)

Drawing should be presented to the child as an **OPTION** for expression, **not** as a required activity!

Explain how we begin our first art - our first marks, scribbles, doodles, graffiti and cave paintings. Students are encouraged to think in terms of "warming-up" to do art with these exercises.

WARM-UP (10 minutes)

Scribbles

Students are asked to remember early scribbling experiences; what and where they scribbled. These stories are shared in the total group with an emphasis on humor and a reminder that despite the outcome, their intentions were good and innocent.

Exercise: (3 minutes) Let students scribble on a full sheet of paper. They are encouraged to try each hand. These are shared with an emphasis upon showing how each student has a different style.

Lines

Progression to lines is explained, i.e. lines are scribbles with beginnings and ends. They have intention and require more control than scribbles.

Exercise: (about 30 seconds per line)

1. Select a color that doesn't want to get out of bed in the morning and draw a line with that color.

2. Next select a color that has "it together", that *does* want to get going and draw that.
3. Draw a line that is afraid.
4. Draw a line that wants to help other lines.

Students may continue selecting colors for different lines, such a line that: has the giggles, has the hiccups, is angry, afraid, scared, having a bad day, doesn't feel good, is feeling good, wants to help other lines, has compassion, loves all the other lines. Have students share their different lines by pointing to the lines. (If time permits, students may either point to lines or verbally share.)

Shapes

Explanation of the developed line into a shape in which beginning and end meet. This takes more thought, more meaning and can tell a story or become an image.

Exercise: (About 1 minute per shape) Have students draw four shapes - coloring each one.

1. a shape that has never been in a disaster
2. a shape that *has* been in a disaster
3. a shape that likes to help the above
4. a shape that's prepared, should we have another disaster

Other options: A shape that's had a bad day, a compassion shape, a power shape.

VISUALIZATION (5 minutes)

Students are asked to get comfortable, close their eyes, relax, pay attention to their breathing and make their minds very quiet. In this quiet state the instructor says "what comes into your mind when I say disaster?" Students are asked to remain quiet.

DISASTER DRAWING (15 minutes)

Brief comment about how we usually talk about the disaster, but this time we will draw about it, not talking while we draw. On the final sheet of paper each student is asked to draw what he/she remembers about the disaster, or what came into their minds. After a few minutes they are reminded to include themselves in the drawing if that seems appropriate.

PROS (One hour)

Students meet as a group and discuss their drawings. Questions are asked to clarify drawings.

Next, the children are asked to share their pictures. "Let's take a few minutes to tell about our disaster pictures," "Tell me about your drawing."

Here are some points to remember:

- Try to keep it factual. Content responses and/or specific questions are most helpful in encouraging children to tell their stories.
- Ask specific questions about drawings for children who are having difficulty talking. "What's happened here?" "How did that figure get there?"
- You *might* then ask exploratory questions based on content, encouraging them to talk about themselves. "You were with your friend, Michael." "Was anyone else with you or close by?" "How was that for you?"
- Don't ask why questions, ask *what* questions or *where* questions. Ex. *Not* "Why aren't you in the picture?", *Say*, "Where are you in the picture?"
- Avoid judgments about drawings or situations.
- Help set limits for children who talk a lot by acknowledging they need to talk and letting them know you will meet with them later.
- It's likely that children will make drawings about things other than the disaster.

Additional Activities

- Draw/write a book together
- Illustrate journals with pictures
- Do a collective drawing - a MURAL
 - Murals tell a "collective story"
 - Murals develop/support teamwork
 - They feel "safer" for some children as opposed to individual art
 - Give the mural a "place of honor" in the classroom
 - Allow children to tell teacher what to draw
 - Make it accessible every day for viewing, additions, etc.
 - Fill it in on an ongoing basis
 - "Celebrate" it: use it to demonstrate getting through something tough, facilitate discussions about it, etc.
 - Take photos/slides of it if/when "completed"
- Computer graphics
- Draw *aspects* of the event (people, places, activities, etc.)
 - Suggest *lots* of options, not specifics, e.g.
 - Rather than saying, "Draw a fireman helping someone," say, "Draw a person you saw doing something helpful after the [disaster]."
- Create a COLLAGE (a combination of "materials")
 - Using a leading question such as, "Where were you when the [disaster] happened?"
 - Children cut and paste photos, magazine pictures, articles, fabric pieces, etc., around central theme.
 - They may also want to draw directly onto it
 - Collages are the "safest" form of "drawing" because the child is using other's symbols.
 - Tell children they may draw what they cannot find in magazines, etc.

Remember when introducing drawing of any sort to clearly say that the goal is not to draw a "pretty picture" but rather, a picture of *expression*!

You may also want to look at other pictures (drawings, paintings) and talk about what they communicate. Encourage various views.

MORE tips, cautions, principles when using the Drawing Method

- Allow a full range of expression: some kids draw recognizable "things", others draw "abstracts." Respect all varieties.
- Allow children to discard their art work.
- Emphasize to the children that their work will not be judged, graded or necessarily shown to others.
Don't exhibit the artwork if a child *does not* want to share it with others.
- Reassure them that there is NO "RIGHT WAY" to draw
- Allow use of various mediums (pastels, crayons, pencils, markers, etc.)
- It's preferable to do the drawing method with more than one adult present
- Exercise as little control as possible over the artwork

Concluding Drawing Activities

A key element of the Drawing Method is the discussion of the activities, afterwards. This discussion can help to bring CLOSURE to the experience; and important step of the process of expressing feelings.

- Allow those who want to, to talk about their drawings
- Others will "close" by listening to others
- Use open-ended questions in this process

The Writing Method

Materials

Variety of paper, pens, pencils, markers, crayons, and colored pencils

Procedure

INTRODUCTION

Introduce writing as:

- another way of "talking"
- a means of expressing thoughts and feelings

Writing should be presented to the child as an OPTION for expression, *not* as a required activity!

The written method is another way of allowing students to voice their thoughts and feelings. The thoughts and feelings expressed in the student's writing may be very personal. Students may wish to share their work with others, but other students may be uncomfortable sharing their work. Students **should not** be forced to share their work.

ACTIVITY

Have the students select their choice of paper and writing tools.

Begin by explaining that thoughts and feelings are very important and can be expressed in writing. Students need to be assured that they can express their thoughts and feelings without fear of criticism. Explain that when they have completed their writing they can choose whether or not to share their writing with the group.

Start by practicing a short "free write" activity to help students begin writing. Everyone is instructed to continually write and not put down their pencils for five minutes. There is no topic for this writing exercise; the instructions are to write about whatever they are thinking about. If they run out of ideas then they can write the last word they wrote over and over for the remaining time. The purpose is to keep the pencil moving. The activity concludes at the end of five minutes. Discuss with the class the variety of topics that came up during the five minute period.

1. Tell the class that today's writing activity is going to be "*My Favorite Day. . .*" or they can write about "*My Worst Day. . .*" -- the choice is theirs. They will be given time for several days to work on their story.
2. The class can then begin working on their stories. Those who wish can illustrate their stories.
3. After the students have completed their stories, those who wish can share their stories.

4. Questions you might ask during sharing time:
 - Has anyone else had similar feelings?
 - Did anyone else have a similar experience?
 - How did you feel when that was happening?
 - How do you feel now that is over?
 - What else happened during that time?
 - How do you feel about the event today?
 - What did it look like, feel like, or smell like? ?

Remember to use previous questions to help lead these activities: A QUESTION CAN BECOME A THEME FOR A WRITING ACTIVITY.

5. Some students may want to put their writing together if they have had similar experiences to form a book.

Additional Activities

Daily Journaling

Keeping a journal is a very effective way for students to express their feelings. Students who have never used this method to communicate their feelings may find it easier to use a combination of words and pictures in their journal to express thoughts and feelings. Journaling can be done on a daily basis for a short period of time. It can be the opening activity everyday for ten minutes. Journals can be dealt with in several ways -- they can be personal journals that students write to themselves only, or the journal can provide a method of correspondence between student and teacher. Questions you might want to consider when responding to the students journals should be open-ended.

Resource Material: *The Creative Journal for Teens*, by Lucia Capacchione, Ph.D.

Poetry

Poetry provides students with a slightly different approach for expressing feelings. The "*haiku*," for example, require students to provide not only the setting, but the mood as well. The "*diamante*" can be used to explore opposites. Poetry provides a different type of structure for expression of feelings. You can discuss students' poetry using the kinds of questions presented previously.

Types of poetry to consider:

- How, What, When, Where, and Why Poetry
- Acrostic
- Cinquain
- Free Verse

Each poem can be illustrated, and individually displayed or combined into a book.

Writing Books

Writing a picture book for other students about the disaster can also help students express their feelings.

<http://www.ag.uiuc.edu/~disaster/teacher/csndact7.html>

Children's Literature on Floods and Natural Disasters

Books for Grades K-3

- Title: **A Rainy Day**
Author: S. Markle
Publisher: Orchard Books
Date: 1993
ISBN No.: 0531059766
Summary: Examines simple scientific concepts by observing the effect of raindrops on puddles, the sky, animals, and the surrounding landscape on a rainy day
- Title: **All-of-a-Sudden Susan**
Author: E. Coatsworth
Publisher: Macmillan
Date: 1974
ISBN No.: 0027226107
Summary: When a family rushes to higher ground to avoid a flood, they discover that their daughter Susan and her magic doll were not with them. Susan and Emelida, the doll, display optimistic courage as heroines.
- Title: **And It Rained**
Author: E. Raskin
Publisher: Atheneum
Date: 1969
LC No.: 6918967
Summary: A pig, a parrot and potto try to solve the problem of rain during their tea parties. The rain makes their tea too weak and their biscuits too soft. They finally decide to start with strong tea and very hard biscuits, then when it rains on their party they are very happy.
- Title: **City Storm**
Author: M. J. Parker
Publisher: Scholastic
Date: 1990
ISBN No.: 059042307X
Summary: Illustrations and a brief text capture the dramatic moments of a sudden storm.

Title: **Come a Tide**
Author: G. E. Lyon
Publisher: Orchard Books
Date: 1990
ISBN No.: 0531058549
Summary: This book uses the diction and homey imagery of a down-to-earth rural community and first-person text (of a Grandma) to portray the sturdy qualities of respond to a flood with common sense and humor.

Title: **Euphonia and the Flood**
Author: M. Calhoun
Publisher: Parents' Magazine Press
Date: 1976
ISBN No.: 0819308366
Summary: Curious to see where the flood is going, an old woman packs her broom and pig into her boat and sets out to follow it.

Title: **Hang On, Hester!**
Author: W. Devlin
Publisher: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard
Date: 1980
ISBN No.: 0688419356
Summary: Hester courageously hangs on to her house when it is swept downriver during a flood.

Title: **Rain**
Author: D. Bennett
Publisher: Bantam
Date: 1982
ISBN No.: 0553054740
Summary: A cuddly bear tells the scientific principles of how (1) water changes to water vapor, (2) water vapor rises and forms clouds, (3) how water droplets join together to form larger clouds, and (4) clouds that are too heavy release raindrops

Title: **Weather or Not: Riddles For Rain and Shine**
Author: W. Walton
Publisher: Lerner Publications
Date: 1990
ISBN No.: 0822523299
Summary: A collection of riddles about weather, including "What do clouds wear under their raincoats? Thunderwear.

http://www.ag.uiuc.edu/~disaster/teacher/bib_k-3.html

Memorials/Activities/Rituals Following Traumatic Events

Suggestions for Schools

School memorials, ceremonies or memory activities following a traumatic experience serve an important function in the healing process for both students and staff. Such activities provide the opportunity to express emotions through a variety of ways besides talking. In addition, a school memorial helps to bring closure to a period of grieving and serves as a point from which to move on with regular school activities. Memorial activities can take many forms, from tree planting or writing letters and cards, to more traditional “services.” It is best to plan a variety of activities rather than only one “big” event; some students will be more comfortable, and more comforted by, one activity versus another. Providing a range of opportunities to express feelings is essential.

Memorial activities following a large-scale traumatic event such as the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995 or the terrorist attacks of September 2001 have a somewhat different focus compared to memorials following a student or staff death or even multiple deaths following a school shooting or natural disaster. “Closure” may be difficult to achieve, even after several weeks, due to ongoing fear that the situation may recur or that traumatic events, such as war, may take place. In such situations, a significant purpose of a memorial activity is to bring people together in order to express feelings and concerns together—to reduce feelings of isolation and vulnerability. A further purpose is to encourage everyone to think about ways—even very small steps—that can be taken to increase feelings of security and reduce conflicts that can lead to violence at all levels.

Guidelines for Planning School Memorial Activities

Participation in memorial activities is important even when students or school personnel do not know any of the victims or their families. The following are key points for schools to consider:

- Proceed slowly and involve students, staff, families, and the community in your planning and decision-making. Remember, the planning and construction of the memorial in Oklahoma City for the victims of the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building took five years.
- Schools should form a committee that includes administrators, teachers, parents and students to plan memorial activities. It is very important to involve students in the planning process including those who had personal ties to the victims if possible.
- Memorial events can be planned as a series of activities, not just the more traditional permanent marker or structure in memory of those who died. Schools can hold group “services” as well as involve classrooms in creating their own tributes, artwork, cards, letters, etc.
- Memorial activities—at least the initial activity—should take place within one week of the event if possible.

- Demonstrate acknowledgement of and sensitivity toward issues of diversity including culturally specific rituals, traditions, beliefs, activities, and practices.

Suggested Memorial Activities

- A temporary memorial site can be established. Flowers, notes, poems, ribbons, stuffed animals, pictures and other objects can be brought by students and staff to a designated location at school to pay tribute to those who died and those who helped to rescue and support survivors. School and community input should be obtained to determine if a more permanent place for these objects is feasible or to otherwise determine an appropriate, sensitive way to dismantle the memorial site. The location of permanent memorials at school should be considered very carefully and locations other than main entrances are recommended.
- Schools and communities who have experienced significant traumas often look for what is termed as “the gift of hope”; i.e., activities and projects that will make a difference and prevent similar tragedies in the future. Following violent events, activities and curriculum that address tolerance and bullying would be appropriate “gifts.”
- Writing activities can be particularly helpful for students of all ages. Students can write and send cards, letters and posters to the families of the victims (in care of a support organization such as the Red Cross) or to those involved in rescue work (police and fire personnel). Older students might also write to local, state or national leaders.
- Be sure to involve all students, including those with disabilities. Activities can be tailored to the cognitive and emotional development levels of all students. Special education staff can be helpful in assuring that all students feel included and that activities are appropriate for them.

Developmental Considerations

Memorial activities should be planned to be appropriate to the developmental level of students involved.

- Young children need to do something to express their grief, even though they may not really understand all that has happened. Drawings—to hang up in the school hallway, to send to the firemen and policemen who helped victims, to send to school children in disaster areas—are an excellent way for young children to express and share their feelings. They can also perform songs or reading of poems as part of a school-wide memorial service.
- Adolescents need activities that provide them with a sense of contribution to the school’s and community’s efforts, not only in recognition of the event and honoring the victims, but in preventing such tragedies in the future. Involve middle school and high school students in all aspects of planning memorial activities, including performing as well as helping with setting up and cleaning up; gather their suggestions for prevention of such events—such as ideas about improving security (locally or more globally) and increasing tolerance and peaceful conflict resolution. Students might be encouraged to write members of Congress or appropriate agencies with their suggestions. In response to

terrorism or war-related events, older students might also benefit from studying the political and religious issues that might help explain the origins of hatred and fanaticism.

Specific Guidelines for School Memorial Services

- Involve students of all ages in planning the service.
- Keep the memorial service brief and appropriate to the age of the students. For elementary students, 15-20 minutes is appropriate; for older students, up to an hour.
- Include music and student performances. Playing soothing music as people enter and leave the service will help set and maintain a calm mood.
- Preview the service with students, parents and staff ahead of time. Teachers should help students anticipate how this will be different from typical school assemblies, and should discuss appropriate behavior.
- Have several brief speakers. Select individuals who are well known to students and who represent security and safety—people who students can recognize as able to provide reassurances and support (mayor, superintendent, local police chief or school liaison officer, etc.)
- Invite family members to attend.
- For memorial services/programs, all staff and students should attend (unless parents specifically object). Such programs can be very powerful in uniting the school community, and send the message that each individual is important. If some students choose to not attend, provide a quiet activity as an alternative.
- Involve classrooms by inviting them to bring and hang a class banner or poster to honor the victims or promote peace.
- Use symbols of life and hope in memorial activities. Balloons and candles can be used very effectively to promote a positive, uplifting message that acknowledges pain and sadness yet also is hopeful for the future.
- Following a school-wide memorial service, students should return to their classrooms for at least a short time prior to dismissal. This allows time to talk with each other, their teacher or a mental health staff member (if available) to “debrief” the experience.
- Provide a forum that allows the inclusion of diverse traditions and rituals that are specific to members of the community.

Follow-Up Activities

Particularly following events that will have no real closure for an extended time (i.e., because recovery efforts will be slow, because identification of the perpetrators may not be resolved quickly, because the impact of the event has long-term consequences, etc.), it is important for schools to consider an activity to address ongoing concerns. Schools might consider:

- Linking with other community efforts (such as food drives or other donation activities to children and families displaced by the attacks)
- Establishing and implementing conflict resolution, tolerance and other instructional programs that have long-term prevention goals
- Building a permanent memorial or establishing an ongoing memorial “fund” for disaster relief for current and future tragedies.

For further information on promoting tolerance among children and youth, contact NASP at (301) 657-0270 or visit NASP's website at www.nasponline.org

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http://www.nasponline.org/NEAT/memorials_general.html

The following contains additional information to help teachers and other child care providers better understand the effects of Hurricane Katrina on their children. Also included is information teachers may want to pass on to parents/guardians.

CHILDREN'S REACTIONS TO DISASTER

Author Unknown

A Disaster, whether community wide or involving only a single family, may leave children especially frightened, insecure, or upset about what happened. They may display a variety of emotional responses after a disaster, and it is important to recognize that these responses are normal.

How a parent reacts will make a great difference in the Child's understanding and recovery after the disaster. Parents should make every effort to keep the children informed about what is happening and to explain it in terms that they can understand.

The following list includes some of the reactions you may see in your child:

- Crying/Depression
- Bedwetting
- Thumbsucking
- Nightmares
- Clinging/fear of being left alone
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Regression to previous behaviors
- Fighting
- Increase in physical complaints
- Excessive fear of darkness
- Inability to concentrate
- Withdrawal and isolation
- Not wanting to attend school
- Headaches

Some things that will help your child recover are:

- Hug and touch your child often.
- Reassure the child frequently that you are safe and together.
- Talk with your child about his/her feelings about the disaster. Share your feelings too. Give information the child can understand.
- Talk about what happened.
- Spend extra time with your child at bedtime.
- Allow children to grieve about their lost treasures; a toy, a blanket, a lost home.
- Talk with your child about what you will do if another disaster strikes. Let your child help in preparing and planning for future disasters.
- Try to spend extra time together in family activities to begin replacing fears with pleasant memories.
- If your child is having problems at school, talk to the teacher so that you can work together to help your child.

Usually a child's emotional response to a disaster does not last long. Be aware that some problems may not appear immediately or may recur months after the disaster. Talking openly with your children will help them to recover more quickly from the loss. If you feel your child may need additional help to recover from the disaster, contact your Employee Assistance Program, or your Mental Health Association.

<http://www.trauma-pages.com/chld-res.htm>

Children & Disasters

Disasters may strike quickly and without warning. These events can be frightening for adults, but they are traumatic for children if they don't know what to do.

During a disaster, your family may have to leave your home and daily routine. Children may become anxious, confused, or frightened. It is important to give children guidance that will help them reduce their fears.

Children and Their Response to Disaster

Children depend on daily routines: They wake up, eat breakfast, go to school, play with friends. When emergencies or disasters interrupt this routine, children may become anxious.

In a disaster, they'll look to you and other adults for help. How you react to an emergency gives them clues on how to act. If you react with alarm, a child may become more scared. They see our fear as proof that the danger is real. If you seem overcome with a sense of loss, a child may feel their losses more strongly.

Children's fears also may stem from their imagination, and you should take these feelings seriously. A child who feels afraid is afraid. Your words and actions can provide reassurance. When talking with your child, be sure to present a realistic picture that is both honest and manageable.

Feelings of fear are healthy and natural for adults and children. But as an adult, you need to keep control of the situation. When you're sure that danger has passed, concentrate on your child's emotional needs by asking the child what's uppermost in his or her mind. Having children participate in the family's recovery activities will help them feel that their life will return to "normal." Your response during this time may have a lasting impact.

Be aware that after a disaster, children are most afraid that--

- The event will happen again.
- Someone will be injured or killed.
- They will be separated from the family.
- They will be left alone.

Advice to Parents:

Prepare for Disaster

You can create a [Family Disaster Plan](#) and practice it so that everyone will remember what to do when a disaster does occur.

Contact your local emergency management or civil defense office, or your local Red Cross chapter for materials that describe how your family can create a disaster plan. Everyone in the household, including children, should play a part in the family's response and recovery efforts.

Teach your child how to recognize danger signals. Make sure your child knows what smoke detectors, fire alarms and local community warning systems (horns, sirens) sound like.

Explain how to call for help. Teach your child how and when to call for help. Check the telephone directory for local emergency phone numbers and post these phone numbers by all telephones. If you live in a 9-1-1 service area, tell your child to call 9-1-1. Even very young children can be taught how and when to call for emergency assistance.

Help your child memorize important family information. Children should memorize their family name, address and phone number. They should also know where to meet in case of an emergency. Some children may not be old enough to memorize the information. They could carry a small index card that lists emergency information to give to an adult or babysitter.

After the Disaster: Time for Recovery

Immediately after the disaster, try to reduce your child's fear and anxiety.

Keep the family together. While you look for housing and assistance, you may want to leave your children with relatives or friends. Instead, keep the family together as much as possible and make children a part of what you are doing to get the family back on its feet. Children get anxious, and they'll worry that their parents won't return.

Calmly and firmly explain the situation. As best as you can, tell children what you know about the disaster. Explain what will happen next. For example, say, "Tonight, we will all stay together in the shelter." Get down to the child's eye level and talk to him or her.

Encourage children to talk. Let children talk about the disaster and ask questions as much as they want. Encourage children to describe what they're feeling. Listen to what they say. If possible, include the entire family in the discussion.

Include children in recovery activities. Give children chores that are their responsibility. This will help children feel they are part of the recovery. Having a task will help them understand that everything will be all right.

You can help children cope by understanding what causes their anxieties and fears.

Reassure them with firmness and love. Your children will realize that life will eventually return to normal. If a child does not respond to the above suggestions, seek help from a mental health specialist or a member of the clergy.

From "Helping Children Cope With Disaster." developed by the [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#) and the [American Red Cross](#).

FACTS FOR FAMILIES

from the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

HELPING CHILDREN AFTER A DISASTER

A catastrophe such as an earthquake, hurricane, tornado, fire or flood is frightening to children and adults alike. It is important to acknowledge the frightening parts of the disaster when talking with a child about it. Falsely minimizing the danger will not end a child's concerns. Several factors affect a child's response to disaster.

The way children see and understand their parents' response is very important. Children are aware of their parents' worries most of the time but they are particularly sensitive during a crisis. Parents should admit their concerns to their children, and also stress their abilities to cope with the situation.

A child's reaction also depends on how much destruction he or she sees during and after the disaster. If a friend or family member has been killed or seriously injured, or if the child's school or home has been severely damaged, there is a greater chance that the child will experience difficulties.

A child's age affects how the child will respond to the disaster. For example, six-year-olds may show their concerns about a catastrophe by refusing to attend school, whereas adolescents may minimize their concerns but argue more with parents and show a decline in school performance. It is important to explain the event in words the child can understand.

Following a disaster, people may develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is psychological damage that can result from experiencing, witnessing or participating in an overwhelmingly traumatic (frightening) event. Children with this disorder have repeated episodes in which they re-experience the traumatic event. Children often relive the trauma through repetitive play. In young children, distressing dreams of the traumatic event may change into nightmares of monsters, of rescuing others or of threats to self or others.

PTSD rarely appears during the trauma itself. Though its symptoms can occur soon after the event, the disorder often surfaces several months or even years later.

Parents should be alert to these changes:

- Refusal to return to school and "clinging" behavior, shadowing the mother or father around the house;
- Persistent fears related to the catastrophe (such as fears about being permanently separated from parents);
- Sleep disturbances such as nightmares, screaming during sleep and bedwetting, persisting more than several days after the event;
- Loss of concentration and irritability;
- Behavior problems - for example, misbehaving in school or at home in ways that are not typical for the child;
- Physical complaints (stomachaches, headaches, dizziness) for which a physical cause cannot be found;
- Withdrawal from family and friends, listlessness, decreased activity, preoccupation with the events of the disaster.

Professional advice or treatment for children affected by a disaster -- especially those who have witnessed destruction, injury or death -- can help prevent or minimize PTSD. Parents who are concerned about their children can ask their pediatrician or family doctor to refer them to a child and adolescent psychiatrist or other mental health professional.

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<http://www.trauma-pages.com/aacap.htm>

FAMILY COPING STRATEGIES

by Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health

Talk about the event.

Encourage family members to describe what they: Saw . . Heard . . . Thought . . . Smelled . . . Felt . . .

- Be supportive and non-judgmental.
- Get and give information.

Discuss factual information about what caused the disaster.
Talk about the earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, etc.

Share about recent changes in your lives. This helps everyone know what is happening and what to expect.

- Maintain crucial standards with children but be more flexible with less important expectations.
- Be flexible with roles and chores.
- Set priorities and problem solve with input from family members.
- Allow time to heal. Give yourself and your family time to heal at their own pace. Think of healing as a family issue not an individual one.
- Give and ask for support from family members, friends and the community.
- Review emergency preparedness. Improve those areas that need some attention and family practice drills.
- Laugh. Use humor. Try to lighten up if you can.
- Be more tolerant. Give each other space.
- Validate each other:

Give hugs.

Tell each other how much they are appreciated.

Offer praise.

- Use rituals. Rituals are symbolic events that can support and aid growth and healing. Rituals can help the family in the healing process and reaffirm family bonds. As an example, one family who lost their home in a fire filled balloons, each representing something they lost in the fire. The family gathered in a circle at the site of their home and said a few words about what each item meant and then released the balloons in the air.
- After some time has passed, review what has happened with your family. Concentrate on how each person has changed or grown.
- Take time to do fun things.

<http://www.trauma-pages.com/famcope.htm>

Coping with Crisis--Helping Children With Special Needs

Tips for School Personnel and Parents

National Association of School Psychologists

When a crisis event occurs—in school, in the community or at the national level—it can cause strong and deeply felt reactions in adults and children, especially those children with special needs. Many of the available crisis response resources are appropriate for use with students with disabilities, provided that individual consideration is given to the child’s developmental and emotional maturity. Acts of healing such as making drawings, writing letters, attending memorial ceremonies and sending money to relief charities are important for all children.

How adults express their emotions will influence the reactions of children and youth. Further, children with disabilities (e.g., emotional, cognitive, physical, etc.) will react to the trauma and stress based on their past experience and awareness of the current situation. Caregivers and school personnel who know a child well can best predict his or her reactions and behaviors because they have observed the child’s response to stress in the past.

Triggers and Cues: Children with disabilities generally have specific “triggers”—words, images, sounds, etc.-- that signal danger or disruption to their feelings of safety and security. Again, these are specific to each child but come from past experiences, association with traumas, seeing fear in adults, etc. Children tend to develop their own “cues” in response to these trigger events, warning signals that adults can “read” to understand that the child is having difficulty. These cues may include facial expressions or nervous tics, changes in speech patterns, sweating, feeling ill, becoming quiet or withdrawn, complaining or getting irritable, exhibiting a fear or avoidance response, etc.

When adults anticipate these triggers or observe these cues, they should provide assurance, support and attention as quickly as possible. If adults miss these cues, children may escalate their behavior to a point where they completely lose control. If this occurs, adults need to remove the child to the safest place available, allow the child to calm down, and then talk to the child about the triggering fears or situation.

Because parents and teachers see children in different situations, ***it is essential that they work together to share information about triggers and cues.*** This is best done on a regular basis, such as during the IEP meeting or a periodic review meeting, rather than in response to a crisis. However, when a crisis occurs, parents, case managers and others who work with the child should meet to briefly discuss specific concerns and how to best address the child’s needs in the current situation.

In the context of prevention and the development of effective IEPs, some children need specific training and interventions to help them to develop self-control and self-management skills and strategies. During the teaching process, these skills and strategies should be taught so they can be demonstrated successfully under stressful conditions (e.g., school crises, terrorism, tornado) so that children can respond appropriately and effectively. Adults should still expect that children will demonstrate their self-control skills with less efficiency when confronted by highly unusual or stressful situations.

Tips for Special Populations

All children benefit from concrete information presented at the proper level of understanding, and maturity. Helping all children to stop and think about their reactions and behavior, especially with regard to anger and fear, is recommended and often necessary in order for them to make “good choices.” For some students with behavioral disorders, training in anger management, coping and conflict resolution skills are important additions to a comprehensive intervention program. The following information addresses specific, additional considerations for children with special needs.

Autism: Children with autism pose very difficult challenges to caregivers. It is difficult to know how much information a nonverbal child is absorbing from television and conversations. It is important to pay close attention to the cues they may provide regarding their fears and feelings and provide them with ways to communicate. Remember that any change in routine may result in additional emotional or behavioral upset. If the child’s environment must be changed (e.g., an evacuation, the absence of a parent), try to maintain as much of the normal routine (e.g., meals, play, bedtime) as possible—even in the new environment. In addition, try to bring concrete elements from the child’s more routine environment (e.g., a toy, blanket, doll, eating utensils) into the new environment to maintain some degree of “sameness” or constancy.

Many students with autism can be helped to comprehend behavior they observe but poorly understand through the use of “social stories.” The parent or teacher’s explanation of what is happening can be reduced to a social story. A storybook can then be kept by the child to help reinforce the information on a concrete, basic level. For further information on the use of social stories visit the Autism Homepage at <http://members.spree.com/autism/socialstories.htm>.

Verbal children with autism may state a phrase repeatedly, such as, “we are all going to die.” This type of statement will serve to isolate the child socially from his peers and other adults. To help the child avoid such statements, it will be necessary to provide very concrete information about the situation and appropriate ways to react and respond that are within the child’s skill level.

Cognitive Limitations: Children with *developmental or cognitive impairments* may not understand events or their own reactions to events and images. Teachers and caregivers need to determine the extent to which the child understands and relates to the traumatic event. Some lower functioning children will not be able to understand enough about the event to experience any stress, while some higher functioning children with cognitive impairments may understand the event but respond to it like a younger child without disabilities.

Overall, children with cognitive limitations may respond to traumatic events based more on their observations of adult and peer emotions rather than the verbal explanations that they may receive. Discussions with them need to be specific, concrete and basic; it may be necessary to use pictures in explaining events and images. These children will need concrete information to help them understand that images of suffering and destruction are in the past, far away (if true) and that they are not going to hurt them. A parent may offer words of reassurance such as, “We are lucky to have the Red Cross in our community to help all the families who were hurt by the flood;” “The boys who brought the guns to school are in jail, they can’t hurt anyone else now.”

Learning Disabilities: Students with learning disabilities (LD) may or may not need supports that are different from students without disabilities, depending upon their level of emotional maturity and ability to understand the concepts discussed. Many students with LD are able to process language and apply abstract concepts without difficulty, while others have specific deficits in these skills. In particular, some students with LD interpret very literally; therefore teachers and parents need to choose their words carefully to insure the child will not misinterpret. For example, even referring to terrorism as “acts of war” may confuse some children who interpret language literally; they may envision foreign soldiers, tanks and fighter planes attacking America.

If your child or student appears to have difficulty following the news reports and class discussions of the traumatic events and their aftermath, reinforce verbal explanations with visual materials; use concrete terms in discussion; check for understanding of key vocabulary. Remember that some students with LD have difficulty with time and space concepts, and may be confused by what they see on television-- they may have difficulty understanding what happened when, what is likely to happen next, etc. They may also be uncertain as to where these events took place and might benefit from looking at simple maps.

Some students with LD have difficulties with social skills and self-management, and may need additional instruction in anger control, tolerance of individual differences and self-monitoring. Additionally, some of the tips listed for children with cognitive impairments may be applicable to some students with LD who, despite their higher cognitive ability, have similar difficulties with verbal learning, memory and communication.

Visual, Hearing or Physical Limitations: Children who do not possess developmental or cognitive impairments but who are *visually impaired, hearing impaired or physically challenged* will understand, at their level of development, what is happening and may become frightened by the limitations their disability poses on them. In your explanations, be honest but reassuring. Safety and mobility are major concerns for students challenged by visual, hearing and physical impairments. As with all children, they need to know that they are going to be safe and that they can find a safe place in an emergency. Review safety plans and measures with them, provide lots of reassurance, and practice with them, if necessary. When explaining plans that may take them into unfamiliar territory, provide very simple and explicit explanations. Students with visual impairments will need to have the area carefully described to them, while the students challenged by physical or hearing impairments may need visual aids as to what they have to do and where they have to go.

- **Vision-impaired:** The child with a visual impairment cannot pick up on visual cues such as facial expressions. Use verbal cues to reinforce what you are feeling and seeing. Many children have seen video clips of the disaster or traumatic event and are talking about them. The vision-impaired child may need a verbal description to reinforce what they have heard about the events. Ask questions to clarify their understanding of what has happened. Children with visual impairments may have extraordinary concerns about their mobility and ability to move to safety during a crisis. Answer questions and give additional orientation and mobility training if needed.
- **Hearing Impaired:** Children who are hearing impaired will generally not be able to keep up with the fast talking of adults during traumatic events. Caregivers will need to be aware of the child's frustration when trying to keep up with the conversation, if the child has sufficient hearing to participate. Children who are unable to hear or lip-read will need interpretation. Not being able to understand will result in greater fear reactions. Children who are hearing impaired may not be familiar with all the new terminology used in describing or explaining the events that are occurring. Be aware of the language you use, be very concrete and check for understanding. Use visual materials in conjunction with any verbal or signed explanations.
- **For total communication students** it is important to have a signer near them. They need to know that someone will be there for them. For oral communicators distance may be an issue as they may experience difficulty with lip reading. Darkness such as blackouts or disaster drills in areas with poor lighting, presents problems for total and oral communicators. In helping them understand that they are safe, that you are going to keep them safe, be sure and show them a flashlight and let them know where they are going to be kept and that they are a part of the safety plan and available for them in darkness.

Severe Emotional Disturbance/Behavior Disorder: Students who have serious emotional and behavioral problems are at high risk for severe stress reactions following a crisis. Typically these students have limited coping skills with which to handle “normal” daily stress; they are likely to be overwhelmed by unexpected and traumatic events such as a terrorist attack or the loss of family member. Those who suffer from depression and anxiety disorders are likely to exhibit exaggerated symptoms-- greater withdrawal, heightened agitation, increased feelings of worthlessness and despair, increase in nervous behaviors such as thumb sucking, nail biting, pacing, etc. Children with a history of suicidal thinking or behavior are especially prone to increased feelings of hopelessness and need to come to the attention of school personnel following any serious event likely to trigger these feelings. Additional information on preventing suicide in troubled children and youth may be found on the NASP website (www.nasponline.org).

Those children who experience conduct problems, noncompliance and aggression are also likely to exhibit more extreme versions of problem behaviors—higher levels of disruptive and oppositional behaviors, more frequent or more severe acts of aggression, etc. These students thrive on the consistent, predictable routines that are difficult to maintain in an emergency or crisis situation.

Summary

Staff and parents must consider how children with special needs respond to any form of stress and anticipate these and more extreme reactions following a crisis. Strategies that have been effective with these students in the past are the best strategies to implement now, understanding that steps might need to be more concrete and consequences more immediate. Identify the triggers and cues for these students and anticipate rather than react—prepare students for changes in routines; allow time for discussion of the traumatic events in a safe and familiar setting; provide choices in activities to the extent feasible to give these students some sense of control over even a small part of their lives. Some students may need to be more protected or isolated to minimize distractions and sources of agitation during the height of a crisis, and adult supervision may need to be more intense for a while. Expect some regression (increase in problem behaviors) and deal with inappropriate behaviors calmly and consistently—it helps students to understand that despite a lot of other changes and disruptions, there are some constants in class and family rules and expectations, and that they can depend on their support network to be available.

Further Information

Additional information on how children with learning differences cope with tragedy and grief may be found on the Schwab Learning website at www.schwablearning.org. For further information on crisis support and helping children manage anger and strong emotional reactions, visit the NASP website at www.nasponline.org.

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http://www.nasponline.org/NEAT/specpop_general.html

Identifying Seriously Traumatized Children: Tips for Parents and Educators

National Association of School Psychologists

Events such as the Oklahoma City bombing, terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, DC, and even natural disasters such as tornadoes and floods place everyone at risk for some degree of trauma reaction. It is normal and expected that most children will experience some symptoms of acute distress—shock, crying, anger, confusion, fear, sadness, grief and pessimism. Depending on circumstances, particularly the additional trauma of loss of family members, most children will experience a gradual lessening of these symptoms over the days and weeks following the event and will be able to resume normal routines and activities with little change in performance. However, a large-scale crisis event places a significant number of children at risk for severe stress reactions.

It is important to recognize that severe psychological distress is not simply a consequence of experiencing a threatening and/or frightening event; it is also a consequence of how a child experiences the event, coupled with his or her own unique vulnerabilities. If a child you are teaching or caring for has had experiences and risk factors such as those described below, you may need to consider a referral to a mental health professional such as a school psychologist or a private practitioner.

The Child's Experience With Trauma

How traumatic is the event for a given child? The degree of psychological distress is associated with several factors:

1. **Exposure.** The closer a child is to the location of a threatening and/or frightening event, and the longer the exposure, the greater the likelihood of severe distress. Thus children living near, or whose parents work at or near, the site of terrorist attacks, a school shooting, or a severe tornado are at greater risk than children living far away. However, for many children, the length of exposure is also extended by repeated images on television, regardless of their location.
2. **Relationships.** Having relationships with the victims of a disaster (i.e., those who were killed, injured, and/or threatened) is strongly associated with psychological distress. The stronger the child's relationships with the victims, the greater the likelihood of severe distress. Children who lost a caregiver are most at risk.
3. **Initial reactions.** How children first respond to trauma will greatly influence how effectively they deal with stress in the aftermath. Those who display more severe reactions (e.g., become hysterical or panic) are at greater risk for the type of distress that will require mental health assistance.

4. ***Perceived threat.*** The child's subjective understanding of the traumatic event can be more important than the event itself. Simply stated, severely distressed children will report perceiving the event as extremely threatening and/or frightening. Among the factors influencing children's threat perceptions are the reactions of significant adult caregivers. Events that initially are not perceived as threatening and/or frightening may become so after observing the panic reactions of parents or teachers. In addition, it is important to keep in mind that children may not view a traumatic event as threatening because they are too developmentally immature to understand the potential danger. Conversely, unusually bright children may be more vulnerable to stress because they understand the magnitude of a disaster.

Personal Factors Related to Severe Distress

Personal experiences and characteristics can place children at risk for severe stress reactions following traumatic events. These include the following

1. ***Family factors.*** Children who are not living with a nuclear family member, have been exposed to family violence, have a family history of mental illness, and/or have caregivers who are severely distressed by the disaster are more likely themselves to be severely distressed.
2. ***Social factors.*** Children who must face a disaster without supportive and nurturing friends or relatives suffer more than those who have at least one source of such support.
3. ***Mental health.*** The child who had mental health problems (such as depression or anxiety disorders) before experiencing a disaster will be more likely to be severely distressed by a traumatic event.
4. ***Developmental level.*** Although young children, in some respects, may be protected from the emotional impact of traumatic events (because they don't recognize the threat), *once they perceive a situation as threatening*, younger children are more likely to experience severe stress reactions than are older children.
5. ***Previous disaster experience.*** Children who have experienced previous threatening and/or frightening events are more likely to experience severe reactions to a subsequent disaster event severe psychological distress.

Symptoms of Severe Stress Disorders

The most severely distressed children are at risk for developing conditions known as Acute Stress Disorder (ASD) or Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Only a trained mental health professional can diagnose ASD and/or PTSD, but there are symptoms that parents, teachers, and caregivers can look out for in high-risk children. Symptoms for ASD and PTSD are similar and include:

1. ***Re-experiencing of the trauma during play or dreams.*** For example, children may: repeatedly act out what happened when playing with toys; have many distressing dreams about the trauma; be distressed when exposed to events that resemble the trauma event or at the anniversary of the event; act or feel as if the event is happening again.
2. ***Avoidance of reminders of the trauma and general numbness to all emotional topics.*** For example, children may avoid all activities that remind them of the trauma; withdraw from other people; have difficulty feeling positive emotions.
3. ***Increased "arousal" symptoms.*** For example, children may have difficulty falling or staying asleep; be irritable or quick to anger; have difficulty concentrating; startle more easily.

ASD is distinguished from PTSD primarily in terms of *duration*. Symptoms of ASD occur within four weeks of the traumatic event, but then go away. If a youngster is diagnosed with ASD and the symptoms continue beyond a month, your child's mental health professional may consider changing the diagnosis to PTSD.

Know the Signs and Get Help if Necessary

Parents and other significant adults can help reduce potentially severe psychological effects of a traumatic event by being observant of children who might be at greater risk and getting them help immediately. Knowledge of the factors that can contribute to severe psychological distress (e.g., closeness to the disaster site, familiarity with disaster victims, initial reactions, threat perceptions and personal vulnerabilities) can help adults distinguish those children who are likely to manage their distress more or less independently from those who are likely to have difficulties that may require mental health assistance.

The mental health service providers who are part of the school system—school psychologists, social workers and counselors—can help teachers, administrators and parents identify children in need of extra help and can also help identify appropriate referral resources in the community. Distinguishing “normal” from extreme reactions to trauma requires training and any concern about a child should be referred to a mental health professional.

For further information about the signs and symptoms of AST and PTSD in children and adolescents, please refer to the National Center for PTSD at the following website: http://www.ncptsd.org/facts/specific/fs_children.html or the National Association of School Psychologists www.nasponline.org

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