

HELPING CHILDREN COPE AFTER A DISASTER

A Children's Mental Health Tip Sheet for Schools and Educators

Educators and schools can be an important part of coping for children who have witnessed or survived a disaster or traumatic event. They can provide the normalcy of a routine in a safe, caring, and supportive environment where children can express their thoughts and feelings.

It is important for educators to be informed and ready to help if they observe signs and reactions to stress in children. Whether a child personally experiences, witnesses on television or hears reports and discussions about a disaster, children of all ages are affected by disasters or traumatic events.

Children respond to disasters or traumatic events in many different ways. Some may have reactions very soon after the event, while others may seem to be doing fine for weeks or months and then begin to show behaviors associated with stress or depression. It is important to remember that these children are not being bad, but are in fact afraid and trying to deal with their very real feelings.

Preschool Age (1-5 years old)

Very young children, ages one to five years old, find it particularly hard to adjust to change and loss. They have not yet developed their own coping skills and therefore depend on parents, family members, educators and other caregivers to help them deal with difficult times.

Very young children may also regress to an earlier behavioral stage after a traumatic event. For example, preschoolers may resume thumb sucking or bedwetting or may become afraid of strangers, animals, darkness, or "monsters." They may cling to a parent or educator or become very attached to a place where they feel safe.

Changes in eating and sleeping habits are common, as are unexplainable aches and pains. Other symptoms to watch for are disobedience, hyperactivity, speech difficulties, aggressive or withdrawn behavior. Preschoolers may tell

exaggerated stories about the traumatic event or may speak of it repeatedly.

Early Childhood/Grade School Age (5-11 years old)

Young children, ages five to eleven years old, may have some of the same reactions as preschoolers. They too may withdraw from play groups and friends, compete for an educator's attention, fear going to school, make poor grades, become aggressive, or find it hard to concentrate. These children may also return to "more childish" behaviors; for example, they may ask to be fed or dressed.

Adolescents/Middle School Age (12-14 years old)

While children twelve to fourteen years old share some of the same reactions as young children, they are likely to have vague physical complaints when under stress and may abandon chores, school work, and other responsibilities they previously handled. While on the one hand they may compete vigorously for attention from educators by becoming disruptive or by displaying other attention seeking behaviors, they may also withdraw, resist authority or even begin to experiment with high-risk behaviors such as drinking or substance use. Young people are at a developmental stage in which the opinions of others are very important. They need to be accepted and thought of as "normal" by their friends. They are also less concerned about relating well with adults or participating in recreation or family activities they once enjoyed.

Later Adolescents/Older Teens (14+ years old)

In addition to the reactions that children twelve to fourteen years old could have, children in later adolescence may experience feelings of helplessness and guilt because they are unable to assume full adult responsibilities as the community responds to the disaster. Older teens may also try to downplay their worries or deny the extent of their emotional reactions to the traumatic event. And,

like children at other ages, when adolescents and older teens are frightened, they too may express their fear through acting out or regressing to younger behavior. Teens tend to talk when they feel comfortable doing so; therefore, educators should be prepared to set aside a time to listen.

What Educators Can Do to Help Children

Let children know that it is okay to feel upset when something bad or scary happens.

Reassurance is important to helping children of all ages through a traumatic time. Very young children need a lot of cuddling, as well as verbal support. Older children may also want to discuss the emotional, physical, and financial impact of the event.

Answer questions about the event honestly and age appropriately, letting them know that in some cases you do not have the answer to their question. For children of all ages, don't dwell on frightening details or allow the subject to dominate classroom time indefinitely.

Encourage children to express feelings and thoughts, without making judgments.

Encourage children of all ages to express their emotions through conversation, writing, drawing or painting and to find a way to help others who were affected by the disaster. For older children and teens, asking what would help them get through this difficult time and participating in an activity such as making a memorial or cards is also beneficial, as it addresses some of their feelings of helplessness. It may also be helpful to have a suggestion box or a place where children can drop notes, questions, and concerns for an educator to address. Make the box available at all times. As an educator, you should address each concern in some way. You should also have a file or bulletin board with information about disasters in a place where children always have access to it.

Establish and maintain a daily routine.

Try to maintain a normal classroom routine and encourage children to participate in recreational activity. Provide careful supervision and additional support, especially for those teenagers with pre-existing emotional problems such as depression. Limit media exposure to the event, including information received on the Internet.

By using some of these techniques and adding some of your own, as an educator, you can play an important role in helping children recover from a disaster or traumatic event.

When You Should Contact a Mental Health Professional

If these classroom activities reveal clues to more serious problems, issues, or feelings within a child, ask a school counselor, mental health specialist, health care provider or your local mental health clinic for help.



For Help Contact:

Mental Health America of Greater Houston Information & Referral

713-522-5161

8:30am-5:00pm, Monday-Friday

Crisis Hotline

713-HOTLINE (468-5463) 24 hours

Spanish Crisis Hotline

713-47-AYUDA (29832) 24 hours

Suicide Prevention Lifeline

1-800-273-8255 24 hours