

# TIPS FOR TEACHERS AND CARE PROVIDERS

## Helping Children Cope with Crises

Natural, manmade and technological disasters can have overwhelming effects on communities. Along with the physical destruction a disaster may leave, additional challenges to recovery may be invisible at first glance or remain unvoiced. To address these needs, Save the Children would like to share its emotional recovery guidance with those who care for children.

A disaster is a frightening event for children of all ages and can leave the children you care for feeling scared, insecure, sad and angry. It is normal for children to show some changes in their behavior, thoughts and feelings during and after such events. These tips outline some reactions you may see in children according to their age, as well as ways you can support them and yourself.

Schools, child care and community programs are a tangible symbol of normalcy and hope for children and adults whose lives have been uprooted. These strongholds provide children and staff with a stable, familiar environment around which to center and organize life.

The routine and regular contact with teachers/care providers and friends helps children to reestablish a sense of safety and security. Your dedication, compassion and skills are needed now more than ever. The information provided here is intended to help you think through new challenges you may encounter in your program as you work to provide support and learning opportunities in a very changed environment.

A disaster can have a profound impact on children and adults and can leave us feeling powerless and uncertain about the future. Some children and families may have been exposed to extreme danger, may be coping with significant losses or may have been uprooted and displaced from their homes and usual supports. As a teacher/care provider, you can play an important role in comforting the children in your care, and in helping them sort out their thoughts and feelings surrounding the disaster and its impacts on their families and community. In the early phases, you and your program may be focused on locating and registering children, rebuilding classrooms that may have been damaged or finding ways to incorporate students displaced from other affected areas. New challenges will arise as your program and community move through the phases of rebuilding and recovery.

In the midst of this, it is important that you take care of yourself and take the time to process your own feelings and losses—for your school and in your own life. In the face of so many changes, it is unrealistic to expect yourself and students to go on as if it is “business as usual.” As a teacher, you like to be organized, in control of your classroom and able to cope with any challenge. But a disaster can cause huge disruptions in your work and life. You may have lost teaching materials or be adjusting to a new teaching environment, new staff and students and the rebuilding of your own home. You may find it harder to concentrate, or you might be experiencing difficult emotions in response to what has happened. To continue to be an effective teacher and caregiver for children, it is important to care for yourself first. Understanding and learning to be patient with your own recovery process will help you to better support your students.

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## REMEMBER TO TAKE CARE OF YOU!

**When parents and caregivers are stressed, anxious or upset, children feel this too. Children do better when the adults around them are confident, calm and reassuring. Take extra care of yourself—your own health and emotions—so that you will be better able to support children in your care.**

**In stressful situations, children do best when their caregivers are calm, supportive and stable. Take the time to process your own experiences and feelings, and care for yourself so that you can best support your students in this difficult time.**

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Seek out all of the people and resources that support you in your life and work. Working with your staff and leadership, create a supportive and positive atmosphere at school is an important source of strength for moving forward together.

**What are some of the challenges you are facing right now?**

Take the extra time and effort to be there for each other. Talk with your fellow teachers about your experiences, fears and challenges, so that you can support and learn from each other. This is a good way to organize your own thoughts and reactions and prepare for addressing children's concerns and questions.

## **Reactions of Children and Adolescents to a Disaster**

Understanding and fully recovering from a disaster is a long process; it does not happen within a week, a month or even a few months. Experiences from other schools have shown that attention to the psychological needs of children after a major disaster is essential for ensuring that students can learn effectively. Although there may be a tendency to want to focus solely on the academics of learning, especially if children have missed some classes, it is important to create a space for children to understand their experiences and process their emotions in order to achieve academic success in the long term.

As children return to school and programming, you may notice some changes in their behavior, emotional expression and school performance. Children may be more fearful of returning to school or programming and have more difficulty separating from their parents or guardians. They may be more aggressive or withdrawn, and may tend to cry or become more easily upset as a result of their experiences in the disaster. As children get back into the routine and structure of programs, most will feel better in time. Children who may have suffered great losses or been exposed to danger and threats to their life or safety may require extra support. Common reactions of children and adolescents to a disaster are:

### **PRESCHOOL CHILDREN**

- **Clinging to parents/guardians**
- **Fearful of going to school**
- **Fatigue from sleep difficulties or nightmares** • **Change in eating habits**
- **Difficulty concentrating and staying on task**
- **Poor school performance**
- **Aggressive behavior, fighting**
- **Anxiety, crying spells, sadness and grief**
- **Feeling guilty, or to blame for bad things that happened**
- **Withdrawal from peers**
- **Losing interest in usual activities**

### **SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN**

- Sleeping and eating problems
- Temper tantrums and irritability
- Being defiant, frequently saying “no!”
- Getting upset over small injuries
- Being afraid the disaster will happen again
- Separation anxiety
- Increased fearfulness
- Being less active or playful than usual
- Acting quiet or withdrawn
- A return to bed wetting, thumb sucking or earlier behaviors
- Asking questions over and over again, sometimes about small details of what happened

## ADOLESCENTS

- Preoccupation with the disaster
- Feeling helpless or powerless
- Being judgmental and critical of adults
- Extreme mood swings
- Acting invincible
- Risk-taking behaviors (drugs, alcohol, sex)
- Changes in sleeping or eating habits
- Acting irritable and easily agitated
- Physical aches and pains
- Withdrawn from friends
- Loss of interest in usual activities

**If you take a moment to reflect, steps you’ve taken in the past to support your students may come to mind, and you can remember decisions you’ve made or actions you’ve taken that have made a difference in the lives of individual children.**

## What You Can Do For Children

Helping children cope and learn in the aftermath of a disaster requires creativity, flexibility and adaptability. You may have already taken measures to help your students heal and learn better. Here are some things you can do to create a classroom environment that helps children express their feelings and adjust to their new surroundings:

### Establish Safety & Control

- Have a supervised safe place within the school where students can go to receive support or sit quietly as needed.
- Increase children’s sense of control and mastery by letting them make choices that affect their day and help in planning activities.
- Be available to talk one-on-one with your students; let them know you are there to listen.

### Set Up Routine & Normalcy

- Maintain classroom routines.
- Peer support is important; create opportunities for students to work and play together.

- Plan activities, rituals and celebrations for students to look forward to—especially around holidays.
- Give students opportunities to engage in conversations of their choosing, not solely about the disaster.

### **Normalize & Validate**

- Reflect what students say and validate their feelings and experiences.
- Discuss some of the normal thoughts and feelings they may be experiencing.
- Sometimes children can be giddy (inappropriate laughing), callous or aggressive as a way of avoiding difficult emotions. Help them to be compassionate with each other and themselves.
- Reassure students, particularly younger students, that they are safe at school and that their parents or guardians and other adults will take care of them.

### **Help Children Move toward Positive Action**

- Help students reframe anger or despair by focusing on positive things.
- Encourage students to develop positive methods of coping with stress and fears, and help them identify which strategies fit each situation. Begin with helping them to identify what they have done in the past that helped them cope when they were scared or upset.
- Encourage students to contribute safely to rebuilding their community and school, and consider class volunteer projects.

**Help students to identify the things in life that they understand better or appreciate more since the disaster. A sample activity is creating a booklet for Thanksgiving with pages that students fill with the things they are thankful for. Similar booklets could be created helping students to understand their new gains, strengths and resources.**

### **Help Children Understand and Learn from the Disaster**

- Learning about natural disasters (e.g., what causes a hurricane/tornado/etc., how experts track them) helps children, especially middle school children, to gain mastery over the event.
- Incorporate disaster-related information into the curriculum, using information and lessons from the disaster in your instruction.

### **Encourage Creativity**

- Use creative arts to help children express their emotions (art, drama, music, photography, writing, etc.). This can be very helpful for children who are not ready to talk about their emotions, or who culturally might not feel comfortable talking.

### **CLASSROOM/SCHOOL PROJECT IDEAS**

- **Fundraise for relief and recovery efforts.**
- **Assist with school and community clean-up.**
- **Plan disaster education activities for the community.**
- **Create a play space or art space for younger children to express their feelings.**
- **Thank rescue workers with care packages or letters.**
- **Gather oral histories to learn about other communities and how they coped.**
- **Research facts relating to the disaster and recovery.**
- **Establish pen pals with other schools or with students who are displaced to other schools.**
- **Connect with other communities that have experienced crises to learn about their recovery.**

## Knowing When Children Need Extra Support

Although most students will begin to feel better and recover with good support from teachers and parents or guardians, some children may need extra help. If one of your students is showing more serious problems that do not show improvement over time (three months is a good age), that child may need a referral for more specialized support. Keep in mind that some students may have had previous learning disabilities or emotional problems, which may be made worse by the stress of the disaster. They may need extra time, attention and care. Learn about your school's referral system for children in need of extra care and support.

### When to Refer

Some problems that may indicate a child needs referral to a professional counselor are:

- Aggression and fighting
- Excessive anxiety and crying
- Students who seem apathetic or numb to disaster-related events
- Excessive withdrawal
- Extreme fears that interfere with daily functioning
- Excessive hyperactivity
- Marked and prolonged changes in school performance
- Risk-taking behavior in adolescents (reckless behavior, substance abuse, self-injury)
- Any child who talks about hurting or killing themselves or others, or who tries to hurt themselves. Take children seriously if they talk to you about suicide and seek help immediately.

## CHILDREN'S SAFETY AND PROTECTION

After a major disaster, it is important to pay particular attention to child safety and protection. If your school is located in an area that suffered damage during the disaster, be watchful of children during recess as well as before and after school. Make sure that they don't play near debris or other health hazards. You may find that your school environment is being visited by many strangers—construction and repair crews on school grounds, deliveries of new equipment or donations, and others on grounds that you don't recognize. Be aware of these strangers and any interactions they may have with your students. When children are released for the day, be sure they leave school grounds on the school bus or in the care of a family member.

As families may find themselves in unfamiliar territory in a new city and community, it may be difficult for these children and parents/guardians to know the safe areas for children to play. Find ways to help your students and their parents/guardians know important information about the community to stay safe. Remember, as a trusted adult in the lives of your students, you can play an important role in helping children who are experiencing domestic violence, abuse or neglect in their homes or communities. Use the open and trusting relationship you have with your students to explore any suspicions you may have of abuse or neglect, and make the appropriate referrals to the school social worker, counselor and/or the authorities.