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National Workforce Centre
for Child Mental Health

Helping students recover after trauma: Classroom activities



Teachers often ask how they can help students who have experienced a disaster or traumatic event. Being familiar with the types of reactions that your students can have is the first step in helping them. Knowing how to work out if there is something more serious going on and how to help children and their families get the assistance they need is also particularly important. Beyond that, there are also specific things that you can do in the classroom to help children who have been directly or indirectly impacted by traumatic events.

Although some teachers may feel that it is not their role to offer emotional support or that these problems may be too great for them to deal with, there is much you can do to support children following disasters or traumatic events. You're in a unique position to monitor your students' ability to cope and make referrals when increased support is needed.

You can help your students recover following a disaster or traumatic event by:

- talking about the event and inviting them to do the same, particularly about how the event has impacted their family and how things have changed for them. This will show your students that you care, and that someone is there to support them. There is a common misconception that talking about a traumatic event can cause more problems, or cause children to develop distress reactions. Children should be supported but not forced to discuss what has happened. In the longer term (i.e. four months or more after the event), it is very unlikely that talking about the traumatic event would cause the child to develop problems. If the child seems distressed while talking about the trauma at this time, this may be a sign that they are experiencing difficulties and may require additional assessment and assistance
- focusing on positive changes as well as the strengths and positive coping strategies the children have demonstrated
- encouraging younger children to express themselves through drawing, which may be easier for them to do
- encouraging them to talk with other 'support' people (e.g. friends, family members) and helping them build a support system. For adolescents, peer groups are especially important. You can use a 'buddy' or 'support' system to help both younger children and adolescents
- providing safe time-out spaces for 'when it all gets too much'
- providing choices to help them regain control. Often, during the traumatic event, children may feel a sense of loss of control. Providing them with choices, or input into some classroom decisions can help restore their feeling of control
- maintaining routines as much as possible

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- setting clear and firm limits/expectations of behaviour. Although it is reasonable to adjust expectations about children's behaviours following trauma, it is important for them to understand that they can't use this as an excuse to get away with inappropriate behaviour. It's important for teachers to set and communicate clear expectations of behaviours
- anticipating difficult times and planning ahead for event anniversaries or important milestones
- preparing students for situations which may trigger reactions such as emergency drills, or activities or content containing themes related to the event.

As a teacher, you can address issues arising from a disaster or traumatic event by:

- re-establishing routines that are as close to 'normal' as possible. Re-establishing school routines is beneficial in many ways. It provides a sense of stability, predictability and sense of safety. However, in the long term, post-traumatic reactions can interfere with a child's functioning, particularly in the area of memory and attention. Unless these symptoms are addressed, the child will find it increasingly difficult to perform well at school. This will result in poor outcomes for the student, difficulties in managing classroom behaviour and disruption for other students
- adapting existing programs to address factual issues. Schools may choose to adapt their existing program to incorporate education about the traumatic event. This is based on the premise that one of the roles of educators post-trauma is to provide children with accurate information and knowledge about the event.

The existing curriculum can be adapted to:

- include scientific data about weather patterns, drought, flood, fire, bush and forest management practices, indigenous management of the land, and the history of environmental disaster in the area
- examine the post-disaster environment such as regeneration, salinity and erosion
- explore preventative measures.

These practices incorporate the child's experiences into the existing curriculum and can also be used as a basis of preparation for emergencies and disasters.

Unplanned responses

Although some schools might prefer to adopt a business-as-usual approach, sometimes unplanned or student-initiated activities addressing aspects of the disaster or traumatic event occur in classrooms. These include telling stories about the event or recounting personal experiences, discussing the event with the teacher or their peers, writing stories or student diaries describing the event, or drawing pictures.

These spontaneous events can be used to explore positive outcomes, such as changes in their environment and post-traumatic growth since the event. They can also be used to address planning and training for future emergencies.

You can respond to these unplanned activities and offer emotional support for your students by:

- letting the children know they can talk to you and that help is available
- increasing the children's social connectedness by using a buddy system
- monitoring and maintaining a safe environment, both within the classroom and outside it
- talking with parents so they are aware of what is happening and can provide support at home if necessary
- introducing classroom activities to provide support and follow-up.

This resource was adapted from content produced by the Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network (ACATLGN) in May 2010, with updates in June 2018 by Nicola Palfrey. Nicola Palfrey is a clinical psychologist and Director of ACATLGN.

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