



Save the Children®

Tips for Supporting Children in Disasters – A Guide For Teachers

Natural, man-made 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 psychosocial guidance with those who care for children.

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

WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR YOUR STUDENTS

Schools are a tangible symbol of normalcy and hope for children and adults whose lives have been uprooted. Schools provide students and staff with a stable, familiar environment around which to centre and organise life. The routine and regular contact with teachers and friends helps children to re-establish 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 the classroom as you work to provide support and learning opportunities in a very changed environment. 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 and 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 and 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.

Normalise and 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 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 Children Understand and Learn from the Disaster

- Learning about natural disasters (e.g. what causes a flood/hurricane, etc) helps children, especially early secondary 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.

Knowing When Children Need Extra Support

Although most students will begin to feel better and recover with good support from teachers and parents, 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 gauge), that child may need a referral for more specialised 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 counsellor 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 behaviour in adolescents (reckless behaviour, 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.

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.