

Fact Sheet

How to Support Students' Emotional Response to Emergencies

Teachers can play an important role in helping students cope with a natural disaster. Living through a disaster can be frightening and the weeks and months after can be stressful and cause diverse feelings: confusion, fear, insecurity and sadness. The support of family, friends and their educational community is especially important to recover.

Teachers can help students of all ages cope with the anxiety that disasters can cause. Teachers and other adults in students' lives have important roles to provide comfort and assurance. They should listen to students' stories and feelings without judgement and give them hope.

Recognizing the emotional impacts of a disaster

Every student reacts differently, depending on age, personal experience or stage of development. They may exhibit some of these reactions after a hurricane or other disaster:

- **Changes in behavior:** They may show an increased level of activity, have difficulty concentrating, become frustrated when they don't remember something, lose interest in activities they used to enjoy, withdraw from friends and family or cling to parents or teachers.
- **Changes in school/work performance:** They may experience dramatic changes in attendance or participation in class.
- **Changes in overall wellness:** Habits may change regarding when and how much they sleep, eat or play.
- **Complaints of physical ailments:** They may complain of stomach aches, headaches or general pain they can't specify.
- **Preoccupation with safety:** Anxiety about being separated from their loved ones.

Addressing the emotional impacts of a disaster

Here are some helpful tips to make students feel safe again:

- **Acknowledge how the storm affected them and the losses they suffered.**
- **Keep to a routine:** Help students feel as if they still have a sense of structure, to make them feel more at ease or provide a sense of familiarity.
- **Understand changes in behavior:** Be patient, help them heal and give them time to return to their normal behavior.
- **Make time to talk and listen:** Talk to them about the events. Let them know it is okay to ask questions and to share their concerns.
- **Constantly support your students:** Tell them you understand how they are feeling and let them know their feelings are normal.
- **Help younger children feel safe:** Read a favorite book or have a relaxing group game or activity.
- **Draw or paint:** Art is a good outlet to express feelings.

- **Exercise:** Include activities kids may do in gym class.
- **Model calm behavior:** Children may mirror the reactions of adults around them.
- **Provide information:** Make it simple and accurate.
- **Limit exposure to media:** Talk to the parents about this.

Teachers: Take Care of Yourselves First

Acknowledge your own feelings of anxiety and ask for help. To better support your students you need to be emotionally strong.

Useful Links

- **Ready.gov** - www.ready.gov/coping-with-disaster
- **Save the Children** - www.savethechildren.org (go to “Tips to Help Kids Cope with Disasters”)
- **American Academy of Pediatrics** - www.healthychildren.org
- **National Child Traumatic Stress Network** - nctsn.org/trauma-types/natural-disasters