



CHILDHOOD TRAUMA REACTIONS:
TIP SHEET SERIES

HOW TEACHERS CAN HELP IN THE CLASSROOM

CONROD
CENTRE OF NATIONAL RESEARCH
ON DISABILITY AND
REHABILITATION MEDICINE



THE UNIVERSITY
OF QUEENSLAND
AUSTRALIA

HOW TEACHERS CAN HELP IN THE CLASSROOM

Teachers often ask how they can help students in their class who have experienced a natural disaster such as a flood, storm or bushfire.

The teacher's primary role following a natural disaster is to **continue being a good teacher**.

Children need to return to normal school routines, and thrive on the certainty of knowing where they need to be and what they need to do throughout each day. Although teachers may play an important role in identifying mental health concerns in their students, their primary role should be focusing on continuing and supporting children's education.

This tip sheet outlines important things teachers can do to help children affected by disasters.

Monitor symptoms over time

Children and adolescents will have distinct individual variations in responses following a traumatic event. It is therefore important for teachers to:

- Be familiar with the types of reactions that young people can have after exposure to a traumatic event.
- Remain vigilant and curious about changes in behaviour of any of the students in your classroom.
- Consider referral for further assistance if the student's emotional or behavioural difficulties are a change in functioning from before the disaster, continue for longer than one month and/or get worse over time.

Maintain routines

Most children respond well to structured environments with clear goals, timelines and activities. Therefore, continuing with familiar school routines is particularly important following a natural disaster. Routine helps to maintain consistency and predictability in one area of the child's life and thereby reduces unnecessary stress and improves feelings of safety.

Ensure that students are aware of upcoming events and classroom activities. This may involve setting an agenda at the beginning of the day, week, or month and reminding children of this. For older children and teenagers, it is important to give advance notice of deadlines and major events, so they can plan for these events.

Talk about the traumatic event

There is often a common misconception that talking about the traumatic event can cause more problems, or cause the young person to develop distress reactions. Although it is important to consider how you talk to the young person who has experienced trauma (and what sort of reactions and coping strategies you model), talking about the traumatic event and the young person's feelings DOES NOT generally cause the child to develop problems.

Tips for talking to children about the trauma or natural disaster:

- Place rules around disaster talk to limit potential modelling of distress and inappropriate coping mechanisms (e.g. set 10 minutes at the start of class for talking about the disaster).
- Contain any conversations which encourage fear. Remain calm and convey a clear message that the threat/danger is over, and that now the focus is on recovery and rebuilding lives.
- Schedule these sessions when you have some extra support in the classroom. A teacher's aide may provide support for both the teacher and students if needed.
- It is very important for teachers to maintain the 'teacher' role as they support the young person.
- Focus on positive changes as well as the strengths and positive coping strategies the young person has demonstrated over this time.
- For younger children, talking about the event may be difficult. Some children might respond better to drawing as a way of communicating.
- Talking can still be a useful exercise for children who have lost loved ones during the floods. It is however important to be aware of the young person's circumstances where possible to pre-empt and plan for emotional reactions.
- For older children or adolescents, talking can focus on more complex issues and how they have affected the family. Adolescents may also wish to discuss how the trauma has impacted family relationships and other ways in which they have experienced stress. For adolescents, it may even be appropriate to encourage talking with other support people (eg, friends, family members), or encouraging teens to bond as groups.

Set clear and firm limits/expectations of behaviour

Concentration difficulties, acting out and misbehaving are all common reactions to trauma, but are also generally common behaviours in young people. Therefore it is always important to explore the origins of problem behaviour before jumping to conclusions about diagnosis or implementing consequences or discipline strategies. It is important to:

- Maintain expectations relating to schoolwork and behavior. Rather, make adjustments where necessary to the way you deliver classroom activities (e.g. change to 15 or 30 minute blocks and incorporate physical activity in between to stimulate attention and concentration).
- Set clear expectations of behaviours and to communicate these to students.
- Implement logical and realistic consequences when expectations of behaviours are not met.

Use a 'buddy' or 'support' system

If not already in place, teachers can implement a buddy system whereby students are paired with other students to ensure that each student has a support person while at school. A buddy or support system might be useful for various classroom activities (eg, going to the bathroom, relaxation time, group activities). Over time, buddy systems can be turned into more 'support' or 'companionship/friendship' systems, whereby children are encouraged to use their buddy as sources of emotional or academic support.



“Even the most disruptive behaviours can be expressions of trauma-related anxiety.”

TIP SHEET SERIES: HOW TEACHERS CAN HELP IN THE CLASSROOM

Safe 'relaxation' spaces

All classrooms can benefit from having safe spaces that are specifically for young people to use when they are experiencing difficulties in the classroom. These areas can be used when children or adolescents need some time to calm themselves down, or if the teacher needs some time to talk to students individually. Placing some comforting children's books or quiet activities in this space will give children something else to focus on while they take some time out from the demands of the classroom.

Provide choices – regain control

Often, during the traumatic event or the subsequent events that follow, young people may feel a sense of powerlessness or loss of control. One strategy that might help children regain feelings of control is to provide them with choices or input into some classroom activities.

Examples of ways in which children can be offered choices or be involved in decision making:

- Providing suggestions regarding fun classroom activities
- Choosing between various classroom activities
- Choosing between assignment topics
- Helping to select and organise fund-raising activities.

Anticipate difficult times and plan ahead

Children and adolescents may re-experience some of their symptoms, or experience some distress at important milestones (e.g. anniversaries of the event, birthdays of lost family members, holiday times). Where possible, it may be a good idea to plan ahead and pre-empt these occasions and provide support where appropriate.

Prepare children and adolescents for situations which may trigger reactions

Some young people might still be affected by sudden and significant events or triggers. It can be useful for teachers to warn or prepare children for any sudden events (e.g. warn about upcoming fire drills, turning off lights, loud noises). For older children and adolescents, it may be useful for teachers to anticipate upcoming events which may trigger responses in youth. For example, teachers may be able to prepare students in advance regarding upcoming assignments or activities (eg, discussion of natural disasters, science class which discusses concepts related to flooding). In these instances, some young people might need to be given alternative activities they can partake in.

Focus on strengths and positives

Acknowledging and reinforcing strengths, positive behaviours and coping strategies can be a particularly important and EASY strategy for teachers to practice and implement. This can be as simple as offering praise to students when you notice a positive behaviour, or personal strength they have developed or demonstrated.

Help students to build a support system

One of the most distressing outcomes following a natural disaster is the loss of community. It is important for children and teenagers to build a strong support system. Teachers can help young people to identify who they can talk to about difficult situations and any problems they are having (e.g. teacher, student welfare coordinator, youth worker or school counselor, principal nurse, sports teacher).



*"Praise is
an easy and
powerful way
to help students
feel good"*

© Kenardy, De Young,
Le Brocque & March,
CONROD, University of
Queensland, 2011

This resource was originally funded by the Australian Government and developed for The Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network (ACATLGN). This resource has been revised for use as part of the Queensland Government Natural Disaster Response, 2011.