



NYU Child Study Center
Giving Children Back Their Childhood

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Children's Responses to Hurricane Katrina: Tips for Schools and Teachers
prepared by the staff of the NYU Child Study Center

As a result of the tremendous tragedy of Hurricane Katrina, American children have directly experienced, as well as been witness to extensive human trauma. Thousands of children are survivors of Hurricane Katrina, while millions of others have observed horrific sights via media coverage. This has included pictures of death and destruction, as well as reports of extensive casualties and missing people. Depending on developmental level, previous personal experiences with traumatic events, and disposition, children have different questions and reactions to this tragedy. While some children may have little response, others may worry that such an experience could happen to them or may feel sadness resulting from the extensive human loss.

Children spend a large portion of their time in school and develop close bonds with their teachers, as well as other school personnel. Therefore, the school setting is an optimal environment in which to attend to and support youth. Further, it is likely that children experiencing distress as a result of the effects of hurricane Katrina will express their feelings in the school setting.

Tips for Schools

Schools throughout the country were affected by Hurricane Katrina in varying ways and, with the event happening just as schools are scheduled to open, schools will likely have to act quickly and without much planning to respond to the events that took place. It is important that schools be aware that steps can be taken after an event like Hurricane Katrina that will enable students and faculty to recover more quickly and with greater ease.

In situations where schools were directly affected by the Hurricane, those left behind are faced with the sadness and anger of loss – loss of community, loss of safety, loss of possessions, loss of loved ones. Those affected may have an irrational sense of guilt that others were impacted in a greater manner than they were. Reminders of the tragedy may trigger memories and cause the child to feel like the event is happening again. Students, teachers, and others may experience feelings of numbness or may try to avoid feelings and thoughts related to the tragedy and may become fearful, have mood swings, and experience nightmares. They may also notice changes in their sleeping and eating patterns.

The school community plays an important part of helping survivors heal after a tragedy. The school crisis team and community leaders can educate students, teachers, and staff on the common reactions to a traumatic event, create opportunities for students and staff to talk to crisis counselors one on one, and hold memorial services and other culturally appropriate activities.

Teachers and school staff may want to involve students in activities such as planting a tree, writing poems, or creating cards for those most affected. This enables students to have a sense of control over their lives and the event. In the classroom, it's important for teachers or other staff members to let students know that everyone reacts differently to traumatic events. Some may feel sad, angry, or scared. Others may not know how to deal with the situation and tell jokes to help themselves feel better. Educating students about the different reactions people may have can help them understand others' behavior and prevent a fight from breaking out when tension is high.

After activities concerning the tragedy have taken place, it is generally advisable for teachers to return to the regular classroom activities and structure as soon as possible. This helps give students a feeling of safety and security. It is a good idea not to introduce new material immediately, but spend a few days to a week reviewing old material since many students will be distracted.

Tips for Teachers

Teachers and other school personnel play a key role in the care of children after a traumatic event. Educators spend a great deal of time with children and are therefore able to observe them and note if a child is acting in a manner that may indicate that he/she is experiencing distress. It is important for teachers to be aware of the emotional reactions of their students and to respond appropriately. It is particularly important that school personnel respond to students who show distress.

If a distressed student is observed in your classroom, it is important to evaluate whether he requires immediate intervention, or if it seems appropriate for the child to remain in class and to receive support from you. If immediate attention is needed, i.e. the child is uncontrollably crying or significantly disturbing the classroom, direct the child to an appropriate school professional, such as a school psychologist, guidance counselor, or nurse. It is important to keep track of the child in distress. Do not send him/her off by him/herself; send another child to with him/her or have the child picked up from your classroom by an adult.

In most cases, however, you will likely keep the distressed child in your classroom. In these situations, the following guidelines will be helpful in caring for the child:

- Find time to touch base with the child either during or after class. Depending on your lesson plan, you may be able to sit down with the child while others are doing independent work.
- Do not avoid talking with the child. Doing so will likely only exacerbate the child's distress.
- Ask the child what is causing his/her reaction using open ended questions—let the child lead the discussion and express what he/she is feeling—do not direct the child with directive questions (e.g. “I see that you are having a difficult time this morning. Is something on your mind?”).
- Be sure to let the child know that you are taking his/her feelings seriously and that you care about what he/she is experiencing. This can be done both verbally and nonverbally.
- Let the child know that the emotions he/she is experiencing are understandable, and that it is normal for someone to respond in this way to such a catastrophic event.

- Let the student know that events such as this are highly unusual and that it is highly unlikely that this will happen again.
- Brainstorm with the child actions that he/she can take that may be helpful to the victims. This could include making a monetary donation, sending a letter to a disaster victim, volunteering time to an organization such as the Red Cross, or organizing a fundraising effort. Some of the child's distress is likely due to a feeling of loss of control. Figuring out a positive activity and then executing it will help the student regain some sense of control.
- If, after speaking with the student, it seems that additional services are needed, make sure that the child gets connected with an appropriate school staff member.
- Later in the day or during the following day, check in with the child to see how he/she is faring. This follow-up will reinforce child's feeling that you were listening and that adults care about his/her experience.
- Speak with other teachers about this student to determine if they saw the same reactions in the child. If the child was only distressed for 15 minutes during your class, support from a teacher may be adequate. If the child has been distressed in every class, a referral to the mental health team at the school is likely to be useful.

Teachers and other school personnel working with children, who experienced Hurricane Katrina first hand, should be on the alert for the following behaviors and should inform mental health personnel if the following behaviors present themselves. These behaviors include:

- Long term denial and/or avoidance of the traumatic event; lack of recognized response to the trauma
- Extended periods of depression (loss of interest in activities, feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, inability to experience moments of joy, profound emptiness)
- Vague and generalized feelings of guilt and depression
- Persisting anxiety about the traumatic event
- Inability to respond to comfort and rejection of support
- Purposeful withdrawal from friends, loss of sociability
- Sleep or appetite problems, unusual loss or gain of weight
- Prolonged rather than transient physical complaints
- Acting younger for a prolonged period
- Destructive outbursts
- Inappropriate euphoria
- Accident-proneness
- Inappropriate/illegal behavior
- Decline in school performance, refusal to attend school
- Excessive grief

List adapted from [Caring for Kids After Trauma, Disaster and Death: A Guide for Parents and Professionals, 2nd Ed.](#) (65 pages, PDF)

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Posted 9/7/05

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