



Prevent Child Abuse Louisiana

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Helping Kids Cope With a Hurricane:



What Teachers Can Do



Prevent Child Abuse
Louisiana

1-800-CHILDREN or (225) 927-6945

Disasters like Hurricanes Katrina and Rita have a profound impact on children. It is difficult for them to understand and accept that there are events in their lives that cannot be predicted or controlled. Perhaps worst of all, we as adults cannot “fix” a disaster, solve it or keep it from happening again.

Teachers play an important role in the healing process of children who are affected by a disaster. Because so many children have been displaced as a result of Katrina and Rita, a normal school routine is more important than ever. School can also be a place where children are able to express their emotions about what happened and to become assimilated to their new environment.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, a part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, offers the following tips for teachers working with children who have been affected by disaster.

Talking

Children affected by disaster need to be able to express their experiences and feelings by talking. Using open-ended, leading questions can encourage children to talk, such as:

- Where were you and what were you doing when the hurricane hit?
- What was your first thought when it happened?
- What did other people around you do during/after the hurricane?
- Was anyone you know hurt or killed?
- Did you have to move to a new place because of the hurricane or the flooding?
- Did/do you dream about the hurricane or the flooding?
- What reminds you of the hurricane?
- What do you do differently since the hurricane?
- How do you feel now?
- How have you gotten through rough times before?
- What, if anything, would you do differently if this happened again?

As the children begin to open up, encourage various views. Acknowledge their experiences and reassure them that what they are feeling is normal. Play a guiding role, rather than trying to control the discussions.

Allow children with low language skills, shyness or discomfort to be silent. It might be helpful to encourage peer support for these children. If a child has limited English-language skills, consider asking for a translator to help the child express him/herself. Create an atmosphere in which a child can feel comfortable sharing experiences and feelings in any language. The goal of the process is to help children feel better.



Non-Verbal Expression

While many children begin to heal by talking about the hurricanes, talking for some is not helpful. In some cultures, for example, talking openly is not comfortable or appropriate, or can even be considered impolite. Some children have been raised in families or situations where talking about feelings was not supported or practiced. Other children simply prefer not to discuss their feelings openly, due to the nature of their personality, worries about privacy or a lack of trust in the process.

To help children through the recovery process, begin by informing and educating them about the disaster to make it less threatening. Point out that there are many ways other than talking to express feelings. The suggestions listed below can be presented to the child as alternatives to talking, but not as required activities:

- Use puppets to help children “tell” or “live” a story
- Read stories from children’s books related to rescue and recovery efforts
- Introduce drawing as a way of “talking silently.” Encourage children to draw people, places and activities they associate with the hurricanes.
- Create a skit or play, or do role-playing, related to the hurricanes. Provide clothes for children to “dress up” in to play the role of emergency workers seen during the hurricanes and flooding.
- Create a collage. Have children cut and paste photos, magazine pictures, articles and fabric pieces around a central theme. Tell children they may draw what they cannot find in magazines.
Collages are a safe form of art because a child gets to use others’ symbols.
- Draw a mural that tells a collective story. *Murals promote teamwork, which could be a good way for new, displaced students to bond with established students. Murals also feel safer for some children than individual art.* Allow the children to tell you what they draw, and give it a place of honor in the classroom.
- Place a suggestion box in the classroom. The children can place notes, questions and concerns in the box, which would be addressed by the teacher at a set time.

Allowing a full range of emotions



during these activities and providing reassurance that there is no “right way” to do them will help children express their emotions about the hurricanes and their aftermath. Exercise as little control as possible. Emphasize to the children that their creations will not be judged or graded.

Don’t exhibit writing and artwork if a child does not want to share it with others. When these activities are over, allow children to talk about them if they want to. Discussion can help to bring closure to the experiences and feelings related to the disasters, which is an important step in the process of healing. Other children will find closure by listening to their peers.

By using some of these techniques and adding some of your own, you can play an important role in helping children to recover from the trauma

The Role of Culture

Teachers understand the importance of appreciating the cultural, racial and ethnic differences, as well as similarities, in their students. This recognition can be especially important when helping children to recover from a disaster. In the case of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, cultural sensitivity is crucial for children who have been displaced and are trying to adjust to an unfamiliar environment. For some children who are still in shelters, a school routine may be the closest thing to their “normal” world that they have.

Culture includes the values, traditions, norms, customs, arts, history, folklore and other institutions shared by a group of people. Culture shapes how people see their world and structure their community and family life. A person’s cultural affiliation often determines the person’s values and attitudes about disasters and ways to cope and heal.

Culture is important to all of us. As Americans, we all share elements of a national culture, but we also carry the gifts and strengths of the cultural traditions passed down by our ancestors.

Cultural differences are traditionally seen in areas such as family structure, the roles of men and women, views on youth and age, the role of religion and spirituality in everyday life, body language, traditional food, customs, style of dress, holidays and festivals celebrated and dating rituals.

It is important to keep in mind that these are broad cultural differences and that there are also many differences within groups and between individuals. Also, a group's culture is continually evolving, based on interaction with the mainstream society and other groups.

Although race and ethnicity are the most obvious components of culture, there are many factors that shape a person's values, ideas, attitudes and experiences. These include age, gender, sexual orientation, level of education, occupation, income, geographic location, preferred language, health status, urban versus rural location, native versus foreign-born status and customs, beliefs and practices. All of these factors should be taken into account.

As you interact with students from other cultural and ethnic backgrounds, there are some general thoughts to keep in mind:

- Acknowledge culture as a predominant force in shaping behaviors, values and institutions
- Recognize and accept that cultural differences exist and have an impact on how you reach students
- Respect the unique, culturally-defined needs of various students
- Understand that people from different racial and ethnic groups and other cultural subgroups are generally best served by persons who are part of or in tune with their culture
- Recognize that incorporating the strengths of many cultures enhances the capacity of the whole group.

The following tips may be especially helpful as you guide your students through the recovery process after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita:

- Learn a child's "usual" behavior and cultural/ethnic responses to be able to identify "unusual" or problem behavior
- Create a comfortable atmosphere for verbal expression in any language.



- Be aware that terms that refer to race and ethnicity often have both overt and hidden meanings. Whenever possible, use the descriptive term that is preferred by the majority of persons in a specific group.
- Know that making eye contact is not accepted in some cultures.
- When using drawing activities to help children express themselves, keep in mind that colors and shapes have various meanings to children from different cultures, and to different children within each culture.

Be aware that children who have already experienced loss, relocation, violence and death are at a particularly high risk of having serious problems after a disaster.

As you work with your students to help them express their feelings about the hurricanes and their aftermath, you may discover more serious mental or emotional problems in a child. If any of your students show serious signs of distress, consult a school counselor or mental health professional.