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Emergency Mental Health and Traumatic Stress

Tips for Teachers

Questions to Help Children Talk About a Disaster

Disasters hit children hard. 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.

As a classroom teacher, you can play an important role in the healing process of children who are affected by a disaster. One technique you can use to help children cope and heal is to assist them in expressing their experiences and feelings by talking. This technique works best when you use "open-ended" questions that require more than a "yes" or "no" answer. There are many leading questions you can use to encourage children to talk, such as:

- Where were you and what were you doing when the disaster happened?
- What was your first thought when it happened?
- What did other people around you do during/after the disaster?
- Was anyone you know hurt or killed?
- Did/do you dream about the disaster?
- What reminds you of the disaster?
- What do you do differently since the disaster?
- 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. If any of your students show serious signs of distress, consult a school counselor or mental health professional.

Additional resources can be found here: mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs/EmergencyServices/links.asp