

Indiana Education for Homeless Children & Youth (INEHCY) McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Program

Tips for Helping Students Recovering from Traumatic Events

Introduction: The devastation accompanying the recent hurricanes has underscored the crucial role of recovery planning in schools and communities affected by natural disasters. This brochure, which is based on discussions with subject matter experts who work with students, provides practical information for parents and students who are coping with the aftermath of a natural disaster, as well as teachers, coaches, school administrators and others who are helping those affected. The guidance below will assist you with following by subject:

- ❖ Tips for Parents
- ❖ Tips for Students
- ❖ Tips for Teachers
- ❖ Tips for School Psychologists, Counselors and Social Workers
- ❖ Tips for Coaches
- ❖ Tips for Administrators

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Tips for Parents

Children will react in their own way and in their own time to their disaster experience. Most reactions are normal and typically go away with time. Parents should be observant, though, if this does not happen.

- Often children will cling to parents and may not want to be away from them. When a child shows excessive clinging and unwillingness to let a parent out of sight, the child is expressing fear and anxiety of separation or loss. These fears should dissolve when the threat of danger dissipates and children feel secure again under a parent's protection. Parents should give them comfort and reassure them that they are safe. Once they feel safe, they'll begin to let go.
- Some children need to talk about a traumatic experience all the time and others don't want to talk at all. This is normal. While it is important not to force children to talk about their experiences, it is also critical for parents to let them know they're willing to listen, and then, to listen.
- Anxiety about disaster experiences and problems sometimes keeps children awake at night, or nightmares might wake them. Temporary changes in sleeping arrangements following a disaster may be helpful, such as parents letting children put sleeping bags on the floor in their room or sleeping closer to them at first. After a brief period of temporary changes, it is helpful to move back to pre-disaster bedtime routines.
- Giving children choices helps them feel some control when their environment has felt out of control. Choosing food, clothes, what games to play—any appropriate choices—can be helpful.
- Children still need discipline. It helps them feel safe to know their parents won't let them get away with too much and that normal rules still apply.
- Going to a new school is hard, especially now. Parents may want to see if they can visit the school with their child ahead of time.
- Enabling children to stay in contact with their old friends or even children they met in a shelter can help them feel that their whole world is not gone. The child's new school may want to help evacuated children get in touch with friends also relocated in the area.
- Parents will want to establish daily routines as soon as they can. Meals, bedtimes and other regular parts of their day can help children feel comforted and know what to expect.
- Sometimes students react to trauma and stress with anger. They may feel it gives them a sense of control. Adults should be understanding but hold children responsible for their behavior. It is not OK to hurt others and break other home and school rules, even if students are stressed.
- It doesn't help younger children to watch coverage of the disaster over and over. However, some older adolescents may find viewing some factual media reports helpful in order to better understand the disaster and recovery efforts. As an alternative, parents may want to read newspaper accounts with their child.
- Parents should remember to take good care of themselves, too. This will help them have the energy necessary to take care of their children. Their ability to cope with this disaster will help their children cope as well.

Tips for Students

Here are some things to think about for students who are at a new school because their families had to move after a natural disaster:

- Millions of Americans watched the news coverage of the natural disaster and are volunteering their time and resources to help students and their families recover and rebuild their lives.
- With so many TV channels and news reports, it's easy to get too much exposure to news about the disaster.
- Students should remember to stay in touch with their old friends.
- Students should tell their new teachers what will help them feel comfortable in their classes and tell them if they are having trouble concentrating or doing schoolwork.
- Students should get involved in activities that they enjoy at school or in their new neighborhoods. They may also want to join a youth group such as the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, or 4-H. This will help them meet new friends who share their interests.
- Some students may find it helpful to have lunch or get together at other times during school with other students who have relocated because of the disaster.
- Students may want to find some way to express what they're feeling by creating artwork, writing, playing music, singing in a choir or just talking to a friend or trusted adult.
- Students should get enough sleep and exercise and eat food that is good for them.
- Students should make time to do things they enjoy. They should play sports, read good books, go to movies, spend time with friends, go for walks or listen to music. Students should try to not dwell on the disaster or their family's situation all the time.
- It isn't unusual for students to want a light on at night or to leave music on while they sleep. They might have nightmares for a while, but this is normal. If they still feel really upset two or three weeks after a return to their normal routine, they should tell their parents or a teacher or school counselor.
- If students or their friends feel really upset, they should take time to talk to an adult about what happened. Some feelings can be overwhelming after a crisis, and talking to an adult can help students feel better.
- This experience has changed students' lives. While they may not feel better immediately, most people will find that they start to feel better after a few weeks and begin to realize that things will be okay.
- If people ask about things that students don't want to talk about, it is fine for them to say that they don't want to talk about those things.
- When students feel anxious, it may help to find a calming activity. Doing math, working out, listening to music, making lists, doing crossword puzzles, or memorizing something sometimes helps give students a rest from worry.
- Students may feel better if they can help someone. It may make them feel good to help at home, do some volunteer work, help make dinner or clean up, babysit a little brother or sister, or fold laundry. It can make a real difference for students to help their parents and others.

Tips for Teachers

Teachers are among the most important adults in the transition and recovery of students impacted by a natural disaster or other crisis. Their efforts will begin to give students a sense of stability, security and belonging. Not only will students look to teachers for support, but the learning process and social environment of the classroom can all contribute to their ability to cope.

- Some students will cope fairly well early on and may have difficulty in the weeks or months ahead. Still others will be resilient when surrounded by caring and supportive adults.
- Some students may have difficulty concentrating, may feel a need for success or may exhibit anger.
- It is important to ensure that displaced students feel welcomed and supported and that they are not bullied or ostracized. Teachers should make sure that students understand that bullying will be taken seriously and will not be tolerated. It is helpful to establish clear expectations about bullying and to discuss those expectations with students.
- Students will also benefit from teachers who:
 - ✓ Care and reassure students that they will be okay.
 - ✓ Avoid using television programs to watch disaster-related events (especially for younger elementary school students).
 - ✓ Maintain consistent and fair discipline.
 - ✓ Provide flexibility such as extra time to do work, extra support for challenging subjects and different ways of showing competence.
 - ✓ Show empathy for what they are going through and make time to listen.
 - ✓ Help them feel welcomed and part of a social group.
 - ✓ Allow them to keep in contact with others who survived the disaster.
 - ✓ Provide a variety of methods and opportunities to express their reactions to the disaster and to tell their stories of survival, if they want to.
 - ✓ Create opportunities to do something to help others, even in small ways. Group activities such as fundraising events are ideal because they also reinforce a sense of connectedness.
- Teachers may already have children in their schools who are experiencing life stress and are not receiving the support provided to those who have been displaced by a natural disaster. This can provide fuel for contention, so teachers should try to ensure fairness and help for all students including those coping with distressing events.

Tips for School Psychologists, Counselors and Social Workers

Professionals who work with students are in a critical position to support displaced families as well as their teachers and administrators.

- While some displaced students may want to spend time with each other even though they aren't at the same grade level, by sitting together at lunch or in assemblies, it's important for educators to ensure that the school is not unnecessarily separating these students from their peers.
- Educators can help the school find ways to express the value contributed by all of its students, not just those who succeed academically and athletically.
- Staff members should try to keep red tape to a minimum whenever possible, realizing that school will be the place many families gain access to social services.
- School leaders should realize that not all students who arrive will have significant adjustment difficulties and a few will have very delayed responses.
- Children who have experienced a great loss will still often benefit by feeling like they can give to others less fortunate than themselves. School leaders should consider activities that allow them to help others in need.
- Educators should provide an in-service training program for school staff on the warning signs of serious crisis reactions and make certain that a referral process has been established and is understood by teachers and other staff members.
- Educators should create ways to help all families, not just the new families, to have social time together. Establishing these opportunities can be a helpful way of disseminating important information and ensuring that community support is provided.
- Educators should be mindful of the significant needs of all students, not just those affected by the disaster.
- Educators should work with community mental health service providers to help ensure a variety of services are available to students in need.

Tips for Coaches

Coaches hold an influential position in the lives of the nation's youths. For some students, sports can offer the opportunity to connect with others, to succeed in activities that require athletic skills and concentration, to temporarily escape disaster-related problems and to find a sense of normalcy.

- Coaches should consider ways for displaced students to play on sports teams. If fall teams are already formed, they may want to encourage new students to participate in intramural teams or to try out for winter sports. Coaches may want to consider creating new intramural teams, if necessary, and perhaps encourage players on competitive teams to serve as mentors, assistant coaches or referees for intramural leagues.
- Students often look up to coaches as role models. School leaders can identify ways for coaches to help new students feel welcome and promote their acceptance by other students in school.
- The role of a coach and the context of athletics are ideal for building trust between students and adults. This can be particularly important for displaced students who may feel vulnerable. Coaches should let new students know that they are there to help them and are willing to listen if they would like to talk.
- Coaches should be observant of new students' behaviors, as they may be able to identify signs of serious distress; if they do, then coaches should seek help for the student from administrators or school counselors.
- The school may want to offer informal pickup games after school. Members of the community can help with this effort.
- School leaders can support informal mentoring opportunities related to sports to connect youths with adults in the community.
- Coaches can encourage their players to help welcome new students.

Tips for Administrators

The decisions educators make early on will have far-reaching implications for both displaced students and for the overall school climate. Even if principals have not received any new registrations, they can think ahead about how to handle the registration process when the first family arrives.

- Some parents may have difficulty letting their children be separated from them. This is normal. Also, while some students look forward to the normalcy of school, others may not.
- Principals may want to sponsor parent gatherings for all parents in the mornings as school starts so they have a place to meet each other and share the challenges of being a parent.
- While assemblies often pay recognition to students involved in sports and leadership activities, administrators may want to recognize a wider range of students, with a special focus on making new students feel valued.
- Staff will need extra support for a while. The full scope of challenges may not be obvious at first and will likely change over time. Principals can provide in-service staff development on helping disaster victims, as well as time for teachers to gather and share their frustrations and successes. Teachers also need the opportunity to generate ideas on how to welcome the new students.
- Administrators can provide teachers with guidelines for leading class discussions on how to cope with disasters. Principals can encourage lessons on such topics as the science of hurricanes and other natural disasters, environmental impact issues, local development and economic revitalization, disaster preparedness and volunteerism. It may also be appropriate for teachers to lead class discussions on what it was like for students to experience the disaster and move to a new place and school. However, it will be important to let teachers know that every displaced child is different and that some will not find in-class discussion of the disaster helpful.
- As with many things in life, flexibility and adaptability are key for school leaders.