

Teacher Guidelines for Helping Students after a Hurricane

Being in a hurricane can be very frightening, and the days, weeks, and months following the storm can be very stressful. Most families recover over time, especially with the support of relatives, friends, and their community. But different families may have different experiences during and after a hurricane, and how long it takes them to recover will depend on how frightening the hurricane and/or evacuation experience was and the extent of damage and loss. Some families will return to normal routines fairly quickly, while others may struggle with damage to their home and possessions, medical care, and financial strain. Some families may have lost a loved one or a pet. A family's recovery may also be strongly affected by school closings or changes in school schedules. Children may react differently to the hurricane and its aftermath depending on their age, developmental level, and prior experiences. Teachers should expect that different children may respond to these events in different ways and be supportive and understanding of different reactions.

Children's reactions to the hurricane and its aftermath are strongly influenced by how their parents, teachers, and other caregivers cope during and after the storm. They often turn to these adults for information, comfort, and help. There are many reactions to hurricanes and other frightening events that are common among children. These generally diminish with time, but knowing that these reactions are likely – and normal – can help teachers be prepared.

Common Reactions

- Feelings of anxiety, fear, and worry about safety of self and others (including pets):
 - Children may have increased fears and worries about separation from family members.
 - Young children may become more clingy to parents, siblings, or teachers.
- Fears about another hurricane coming
- Increased anxiety over future hurricane warnings
- Changes in behavior:
 - Increased activity level
 - Decreased concentration and attention
 - Increased irritability
 - Withdrawal
 - Angry outbursts
 - Aggression

- Increased physical complaints (e.g., headaches, stomachaches, aches and pains)
- Changes in school performance
- Prolonged focus on the hurricane (e.g., talking repeatedly about it – young children may “play” the event)
- Increased sensitivity to sounds (e.g., thunder, wind, and other loud noises)
- Changes in sleep
- Changes in appetite
- Lack of interest in usual activities, including interest in playing with friends
- Regressive behaviors in young children (e.g., baby talk, bedwetting, tantrums)
- Increased chance of high-risk behaviors in adolescents (e.g., drinking, substance abuse, self-injurious behaviors)

How Can I Help My Students?

Teachers can play an important role in helping their students’ recover. Returning to school in and of itself is important in promoting the welfare of children and their families. The following are suggestions to assist you in your work with children, adolescents, and families.

Taking Care of Yourself

First, it is especially important that you take care of yourself. You and your family have had a stressful experience and may have suffered losses and stresses like those of the students you teach. You need to prepare yourself to be able to support them.

- Communicate with others. Make sure that you, with your group of teachers, schedule ongoing times to talk together in order to give each other support.
- Give yourself a break. Try not to overdo clean-up activities after the hurricane at home or at school. These activities may include lifting heavy items or working for extended periods of time. Using moderation when doing such work can reduce injury.
- Put off major decisions. Avoid making any unnecessary life-altering decisions during this stressful post-hurricane period.
- Take care of yourself. Make sure you take good physical care of yourself, including eating and sleeping well and receiving proper medical care. It is sometimes difficult to teach when you are undergoing your own course of recovery. Therefore:
 - Put aside the time to take care of the personal needs of your own family. It can be useful for teachers to cover for each other in case something comes up that you need to take care of.
 - Even though you may feel very committed to the students, take special time with your own family members or friends.
 - If you have a lot of hurricane-related responsibilities, talk with your school administrators about temporally altering your work schedule.

Taking Care of Your Students

Students who have been through a hurricane often have difficulties with concentration, attention, and behavior. Some students may be very quiet and withdrawn, while others may be disruptive and overly active. Many will have difficulties with learning.

- Modify lesson plans. They may have to be adapted over the recovery period to reduce the class's workload, move at a slower pace, and be more enjoyable.
- Communicate with students. Be open to talking with students about their feelings and concerns about the hurricane. It is important to provide accurate factual information to help clarify misunderstandings and reduce fear. End the discussion with focus on current safety procedures and helpful plans for coping.
- Know your students' experiences. It is important to invite students and parents to let you know when a student is affected by some change in his or her personal life so that you can better understand any change in classroom behavior or school performance.
- Share information with others. It is important for teachers to speak with one another and other school staff to share information and monitor how students are doing.
- Provide structure. Maintain a predictable, structured class schedule with specific rules and consequences to provide support and consistency for your students.
- Refer distressed students for help. Teachers should encourage distressed students to meet with the school counselor, social worker, or nurse.
- Encourage your students. Teachers should encourage students to get appropriate rest and exercise and to eat a healthy diet.
- Set limits on anger. It is especially difficult for teachers to have students acting irritably or being disruptive, which may occur after a hurricane or any distressing event. One way to handle irritable, disruptive, or aggressive behavior is to be clear about the behavior that is expected and reinforce age-appropriate anger-management and conflict-resolution concepts to ensure a climate of nonviolence.
- Reduce reminders. Teachers should reduce their student's exposure to unnecessary reminders of the hurricane. This includes limiting teacher-to-teacher conversations about the hurricane in front of students and limiting their exposure to television stories and images of the hurricane during class time.
- Identify sleep problems. Many students may suffer from lack of restful sleep. Tired students often cannot concentrate or learn well and can be irritable with friends and teachers. If a student is having any of these problems, it is important to ask them and their parents or caretakers about their sleep.
- Be patient. Recovery comes in stages over weeks and months. Don't become discouraged because some students take more time than others or have temporary setbacks.
- Promote prosocial activities. It is very important to engage preadolescents and adolescents in prosocial activities to help rebuild their school community and social life. Prosocial activities are important to building a sense of community and citizenship. These activities can include a project to help improve their school or neighborhood or a project to help others in their community.

Further information about children, families, and hurricanes can be found at the website of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, www.NCTSNet.org.