

# Top 10 Considerations for Mental Health Professionals Working in Schools After a Disaster



**1. Recognize that each school has its own culture.** Take time to learn the culture of the school as well as the community and what current adversities or previous disasters they may have faced. Join in with school activities as this is a way to learn more about the school and also shows that you care.

**2. The way you start a relationship with a school system will set the tone for your work.** First, ask administrators how you can be of help to them. Remember that schools are the experts for their own school community and students – and that you are a guest in the school.

**3. Define your role in the school before providing direct service.** Determine if your organization has an agreement and if you will be a member of the school district. This will impact how referrals and confidentiality is handled. If you represent an outside agency working at a school, discuss who is going to obtain consents from school staff and parents and how referrals to you will be handled. Request a reasonably private place to see students.

**4. Work with the school system to identify the types of services that might be helpful.** Identify the types of services you will provide in collaboration with the school, including training, consultation, conducting a needs assessment, introducing screening, or providing additional supports to at-risk students. Determine how services may need to be adapted. Discuss with the school offering multiple levels of services to address the diverse needs of the students and staff.

**5. It is important to be flexible when working in schools.** If you are meeting with a child, you may need to adjust your plans based on the schedule at the school. You may also have to adapt to seeing the child in whatever space is available at the school.

## Top 10 Consideration for Mental Health Professionals Working in Schools

**6. Build relationships with teachers and staff.** Teachers and staff know the children at their school. Take time to get to know them and let them learn more about you in order to build trust. Offer to provide training as requested and consultations with counselors and teachers.

**7. It may be helpful to talk to additional staff at the school (such as the office or lunchroom staff)** whom you might not ordinarily think about in order to gain information about how students are handling the disaster and other trauma. They may have unique perspectives on the children.

**8. After disasters, it is important to recognize that everyone has been impacted in some way.** Be supportive to administrators, teachers, and support staff in addition to children and parents/caregivers. They may be going through their own recovery as they are supporting their students.

**9. Parents and caregivers are always important.** First, you must obtain consent from the parent or caregiver to see the child. Even though you will be seeing the children in school, it is important to include their primary caregivers in any service you provide. Recognize that, at times, eliciting parental involvement for behavioral health support may require additional effort.

**10. Working in a school system is different from working in an office setting.** Seek training or advice about ways to work in schools. Recognize that working in schools may be challenging at times. Remember the importance of self-care for school personnel and for yourself.

**Prepared by: Joy D. Osofsky, Ph.D. and Howard J. Osofsky, M.D. Ph.D.**  
**Consultants: Mindy Kronenberg, Ph.D., Michele Many, LCSW, Richard Costa, Psy.D.,**  
**and Melissa Brymer, Ph.D.**

**NCTSN Terrorism and Disaster Coalition for Child and Family Resilience**  
**(September, 2017)**

**Funded By: SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)**

