

Being Disaster Ready Recommendations for Schools

What does school staff need to know prior to a crisis?

A training program for traumatic events should include the following:

- The expected and normal responses to traumatic events. Knowledge about these responses will help staff manage the behavior displayed by students and other staff members, and help them to identify children that are in need of professional expertise.
- The stages of grief in children and how to help children through the grieving process.
 - What makes certain children more vulnerable and at risk for long-term stress disorders such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).
 - Information about developmentally appropriate interventions to use at the different stages of recovery. This information should include guidance for choosing the interventions most appropriate for the age and developmental needs of school children.

Building Resiliency

Studies have shown that children who are resilient cope better after a traumatic event occurs. It is therefore a good idea for schools to invest in resiliency-building programs. These programs should:

- Be age and developmentally appropriate.
- Have been developed through guidance of a trained mental health clinician.
- Be research-based. Resiliency programs found to be most effective are ones which focus on and enhance the following skills in children: social skills and relationship-building skills; effective and assertive communication; emotion expression and regulation; empathy; and problem solving.

Communicating with Community Members

A school does not exist in isolation. For a school to respond effectively to a disaster, effective communication with families, community members, and community service providers is essential.



- Inform parents and family members of students about the school's disaster procedures. Include family members as well in the development of the plans.
- Educate parents and family members of students about the expected responses to trauma in children. As with school staff, this education is necessary not only immediately following an event, but before any event ever takes place.
- If the school plans to implement a shelter-in-place plan in the event of a disaster, discuss what might occur in this situation with community members. Let them know how the school plans to communicate with families immediately following a disaster, and what the plans would be for reuniting children with their families.

Conducting a Drill

Conducting drills can help a school to prepare to respond quickly and more effectively during an actual crisis. However, if the proper preparations are not made before a drill, the drill itself may produce anxiety among students and staff. Consider the following suggestions to make the drill, and ultimately a response to a traumatic event, run smoothly:

- Provide instruction to students prior to the drill to help prevent anxiety. Include information about what to expect during the drill and procedures that will occur during an actual event. Answer questions that arise. Discussion after the drill is very helpful in ameliorating some anxiety that may have occurred during the drill.
- Orient students to what to expect should EMS be called. Personal protective equipment worn by first responders may appear frightening. The process of decontamination could also be frightening. Provide age and developmentally appropriate education for both students and staff.
- Acknowledge that drills can be stressful. Educate staff about the effects of stress and provide for ways to support school staff when they are under stress. It has been shown that children's coping abilities are directly connected with how well parents and other caregivers are managing stress. So, in order for the school to be able to properly support and respond to the recovery needs of the students, the staff must be supported too.

BE DISASTER READY!

Teachers and other members of a school's staff can make significant contributions to a child's ability to recover from a traumatic event, but only if they are well prepared for these events! Using the steps described in this fact sheet will help a school get on the important path to disaster readiness.

