

Phases:

- Prevention
- Preparedness
- Response
- Recovery**

Audiences:

- Administrators**
- Teachers and Staff**
- Parents/Guardians

Communication #19

Handout: Tips for Elementary School Teachers for Helping Your Students

As a teacher, you are in an excellent position to help your students following a disaster. Just as you help connect students with appropriate academic and counseling services under normal circumstances, you are in an excellent position to help your students return to school, stay in school, continue to learn, and return to their usual school-based activities after a pandemic.

What to expect from your students:

- Feelings of anxiety, fears, worries about safety of self and others (more clingy to teachers and parents).
- Increased levels of distress (whiny, irritable, more "moody").
- Changes in behavior: increased activity level, decreased concentration and/or attention, withdrawal, angry outbursts, aggression, absenteeism.
- Increased somatic complaints (e.g., headaches, stomachaches, aches and pains).
- Changes in school performance.
- Statements and questions about death and dying.

What you can do to help:

- Maintain a predictable class schedule and rules to provide support and consistency for the children.
- Listen to and tolerate your students retelling of events, as well as playing out the events. Schedule specific times for discussion and play during the school day to allow for opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings.
- Talk to your students about what is being done by the school and community to keep everyone safe from harm.
- Limit access to live television and the Internet that show disturbing scenes of the event.
- After any discussion, end the discussion with a focus on their current safety and a calming activity, such as taking deep breaths, working together on an art project, or holding hands and singing a quiet song.
- Encourage students to talk about confusing feelings, worries, daydreams, and disruptions of concentration by accepting feelings, listening carefully, and reminding students that these are normal reactions following a scary event.
- Young children, in trying to process the events, may ask questions that may be initially shocking to adults. Try to respond in a calm manner, answering questions in simple, direct terms and helping students to transition back to their activity.
- Use simple terms to describe what happened (is happening). Avoid terms

- designed to "soften" the information, which inadvertently further confuses children. For example, use "died," rather than "went to sleep."
- Students may misunderstand information about the event as they are trying to make sense of what has happened (is happening). For example, they may blame themselves, believe things happened that did not happen, etc. Gently help students develop a realistic understanding of the event.
 - Students may ask the same types of questions repeatedly, which can be confusing and/or frustrating for teachers. Understand that students may need to hear the information multiple times before being able to integrate and understand it. Give the students time to cope with fears.
 - Expect some angry outbursts from the students. Try to catch students before they "act out," by taking them aside, and helping them calm down and regain control of their behavior.
 - Do classroom activities that will reinforce the message that one person can make a difference to help and heal. Activities can include drawing pictures and sending cards or class projects of collecting pennies or aluminum cans.
 - Encourage some distraction times, which would include doing schoolwork that does not require high levels of new learning, as well as enjoyable activities.
 - Expect some brief temporary declines in the students' school performance. Consider reducing the homework as the nation heals and the national routine is stabilized.
 - Provide reassurance to the students that feelings will get smaller and easier to handle over time.
 - Expect and understand students' regression (acting younger) and other difficult behaviors that are not typical of the students.
 - Maintain communication with other teachers, school personnel, and parents to monitor how the students are coping with the demands of school, home, and community activities.
 - Remain aware of your own reactions to students' trauma.

*Compiled by Robin H. Gurwich, Ph.D., Jane F. Silovsky, Ph.D., Shelli Schultz, Ph.D.,
Michelle Kees, Ph.D., & Sarah Burlingame, B.A.
Department of Pediatrics
University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center*