

Tips for Managing the Psychological Impacts of an Incident

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Childcare providers have a role in managing psychological trauma following an incident, including:

- **Identify at-risk children.**

Victims that have been physically or sexually abused may be at a higher risk of developing post-traumatic stress.

- **Develop partnerships with local mental health practitioners.**

Immediately after an incident, there are often enough caregivers to assist victims with short-term grief. Over time, the availability of resources for long-term treatment dwindles. Reaching out to social workers, psychologists, and other mental health practitioners in the community helps you secure access to these long-term services.

- **Strengthen and encourage peer support.**

Victims can draw strength and develop coping strategies from friends in their peer group. Additionally, these friendships help decrease isolation and encourage discussion.

- **Look for symptoms of psychological stress, including:**

- **Preschool:** Thumb sucking, bedwetting, clinging to parents, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, fear of the dark, regression in behavior, and/or withdrawal from friends and routines.
- **Elementary/middle school:** Irritability, aggressiveness, clinginess, nightmares, school avoidance, poor concentration, and/or withdrawal from activities and friends.
- **High school:** Sleeping and eating disturbances, agitation, increase in conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behavior, and/or poor concentration.

- **Support recovery by designing activities that:**

- **Encourage students to talk about disaster-related events.**

Children need an opportunity to discuss their experiences in a safe, accepting environment. Although group discussions are a good vehicle for validating children's feelings about their experiences, it is important to end such discussion on a positive note by focusing on things that promote a sense of security, mastery, or preparedness. This positive wrap-up may come from students themselves, and teachers can reinforce or elaborate on these points.

- **Promote positive coping and problem-solving skills.**

Activities should teach children how to apply problem-solving skills to incident-related stressors. Children should be encouraged to develop realistic and positive methods of coping that increase their ability to manage their anxiety, and to identify which strategies fit with each situation.

- **Encourage friendship and peer support among students.**

Children with strong emotional support from others are better able to cope with adversity.

Relationships with peers can provide suggestions for how to cope with difficulties and can help decrease isolation.

Example Activities:

■ Preschool and Elementary School Activities:

- Encourage class activities in which children can organize or build projects (scrapbooks, replicas, toys, etc.) to give them a chance to organize and process what may be chaotic and confusing feelings and events.
- Encourage games and physical activity to relieve tension and anxiety.
- Ask children to draw pictures of the incident or whatever comes to their minds. Talking about the picture later with a teacher or in a small group may help them to process their experiences and discover that others share their fears, sadness, etc.
- Have children either write or listen to short stories about the incident. This activity can help children verbalize fears as well as get back in touch with previous positive associations about a disruption.
- Children can draw, write, or talk about what they remember, or respond to questions or topics such as:
 - What happened after the storm hit?
 - How did you help your family during or after the disaster?
 - How could you help your family if you were in another disaster?
 - Did anything good or positive happen because of the disaster? Did you learn anything from what happened to you?

■ Middle School/Junior High and High School Activities:

Childcare providers can use many of the basic principles outlined in the suggestions for younger children with older students. In addition:

- Give children opportunities to use art, music, or poetry to describe experiences and express feelings.
- Encourage children to keep a journal, or write and produce a play or a video.