Supporting children in the aftermath of a crisis

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Outline of Presentation

• How to support children after a disaster
• Symptoms of adjustment reactions
• Timeline for adjustment
• Professional self-care
Psychological first aid

- Provide broadly to those impacted
- Supportive services to foster normative coping and accelerate natural healing process
- All staff should understand likely reactions and how to help children cope

- **Anyone that interacts with children can be a potential source of assistance and support – if unprepared, they can be a source of further distress**
PFA Actions (source: American Red Cross)

- Observation or awareness
- Make a connection
- Help people feel comfortable and at ease
- Be kind, calm, & compassionate
- Assist with basic needs
- Listen
- Give realistic reassurance
- Encourage good coping
- Help people connect
- Give accurate and timely information
- Suggest a referral resource
- End the conversation
Basic needs are basic

- UWF (Brief Therapy)
- Need to deal with basic needs before able to address emotional needs
  - Safety, security
  - Food, shelter
  - Communication and reunification with family
- Staff have their own basic needs
  - Crisis plans need to address them as a priority
Potential symptoms of adjustment reactions

- Sleep problems
- Separation anxiety and school avoidance
- Anxiety and trauma-related fears
- Difficulties with concentration
- Deterioration in academic performance
- Regression
- Depression; Avoidance of previously enjoyed activities
- Substance abuse
- Somatization
FEMA trailer park in St. Bernard Parish, La.
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What to expect in schools in absence of intervention

• ↓ Cognitive functioning and academic achievement (anxiety, ↓ concentration, sleep problems, depression)

• ↑ Absenteeism (school avoidance)

• ↑ Suspensions/expulsions (irritability, social regression, substance abuse)

• → → ↓ Graduation

• Taking time in schools to help children adjust to disaster and aftermath is essential to promote academic achievement
Post-traumatic stress disorder

- Re-experiencing traumatic event
  - Intrusive images or sense that event is recurring
  - Traumatic dreams
  - Intense distress at reminders
- Avoidance of stimuli associated with trauma
- Increased arousal
  - Difficulty concentrating or sleeping
  - Irritability or anger
  - Hypervigilance or exaggerated startle
Range of reactions to disaster

- Wide range of reactions and concerns
  - Not just PTSD
- Bereavement
- Secondary losses and stressors
  - Relocations
  - Loss of peer network
  - Loss of network of supportive adults
  - Loss of community
  - Academic failure
  - Integrating into new social network (bullying)
  - Financial stresses
  - Parental stress
One crisis uncovers other crises

- Crisis awakens feelings related to pre-existing or past crisis, even if event not related
- Future events can lead to temporary resurgence of feelings
  - Grief triggers
  - Trauma triggers
If only the signs were this easy to read.
Parents often underestimate symptoms

- Children may withhold complaints because of concerns they are abnormal, or to protect parents who are upset
- Parents may not think professionals are interested or assume “normal reactions to abnormal event”
- Stigma related to mental illness
Adjustment Over Time in Crisis

A = baseline functioning
B = event
C = vulnerable state
D = usual coping mechanisms fail
E = helplessness, hopelessness
F = improved functioning

G = continued impairment
H = return to baseline
I = post-traumatic growth
Importance of professional self-care

• Recognize it is distressing to be with children who are in distress

• It’s critical staff find ways to have their own personal needs met and appreciate and address impact of supporting children who are grieving or traumatized

• Create a culture where:
  – it is ok to be upset
  – members normalize asking for help and model willingness to accept assistance
Partial list of NCSCB resources

- Parent guide on supporting a grieving child (New York Life Foundation)
- Guidelines for addressing death of student or staff in school (including suicide)
- Psychological first aid
- Guidance on addressing anniversary of crisis
- Guidance document for school security staff
After a Loved One Dies—
How Children Grieve
And how parents and other adults can support them

What's Covered in this Guide
• Helping children, helping the family
• Why a parent’s role is important
• Helping children understand death
• How children respond to death
• Attending funerals and memorials
• Helping children cope over time
• Getting help
• Taking care of yourself
• Looking to the future

Click on the Grief Guide link on the left navigation bar to order product
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AAP Resources

Disasters webpage – www.aap.org/disasters

• Adjustment resources – www.aap.org/disasters/adjustment.cfm


• Pediatric Terrorism and Disaster Preparedness: A Resource for Pediatricians – http://archive.ahrq.gov/research/pedprep/

• Pediatric Bereavement Lectureship Program – http://www2.aap.org/disasters/lectureship.cfm