

Teacher Guidelines for Helping Students after an Earthquake

Being in an earthquake is very frightening, and the days, weeks, and months following are very stressful. Most families recover over time, especially with the support of relatives, friends, and their community. But different families may have different experiences during and after the earthquake, including the experience of aftershocks which may continue for several months. How long it takes to recover will depend on what happened to them during and after the earthquake and the extent of damage and loss. Some children or their family members may have been seriously injured and will require medical treatment and long-term rehabilitation. Some families will return to normal routines fairly quickly, while others may struggle with damage to their home and possessions, with access to medical care, and increased financial strain. Many families will have lost loved ones. Children may react differently to the earthquake and its aftermath depending on their age and prior experiences. Teachers should expect that children may respond in different ways and be supportive and understanding of different reactions.

Children's reactions to the earthquake and its aftermath are strongly influenced by how their parents, teachers, and other caregivers cope. They often turn to these adults for information, comfort, and help. There are many reactions to the earthquake that are common among children. These generally diminish with time, but knowing about these reactions can help teachers be prepared.

Common Reactions

- Feelings of anxiety, fear, and worry about the safety of self and others:
 - Children may have increased fears and worries about separation from family members
 - Young children may cling to their parents, siblings, or teachers more
- Fears that another earthquake or aftershock will occur
- Anxiety about the safety of buildings
- Changes in behavior:
 - Increased activity level
 - Decreased concentration and attention
 - Increased irritability
 - Withdrawal
 - Emotional outbursts
- Physical complaints (headaches, stomachaches, aches and pains)
- Changes in school-related work habits
- Staying focused on the earthquake (talking repeatedly about it – young children may “play” the event)

- Strong reactions to reminders of the earthquake (destroyed buildings, debris, cracks in walls, media reports)
- Increased sensitivity to sounds (sirens, loud noises, things falling or crashing)
- Changes in sleep and appetite
- Lack of interest in usual activities, including playing with friends
- Regressive behavior in young children (returning to baby talk, bedwetting, tantrums)
- Increased high-risk behaviors in adolescents (drinking, substance abuse, self-injurious behaviors)

How Can I Help My Students?

Teachers play an important role in helping their students' recover. Returning to school, even in a temporary setting, will promote the welfare of children and their families. Consider these suggestions to help you in your work with your students and families.

Taking Care of Yourself

In order to help your students, you come first.

- **Take care of yourself.** Do your best to drink plenty of water, eat regularly, and get enough sleep.
- **Take time for your family.** Try to take care of the personal needs of your own family. It can be useful for teachers to cover for each other when something comes up that you need to take care of.
- **Communicate with others.** Make sure that you talk with other teachers to give each other support.
- **Give yourself a break.** Try not to overdo clean-up activities at home or at school, including lifting heavy items or working for extended periods of time.
- **Put off major decisions.** Avoid making any unnecessary life-altering decisions during this stressful time.

Taking Care of Your Students

Here are some suggestions to help your students:

- **Modify lesson plans.** Reduce the workload, move at a slower pace, and make lessons more enjoyable, especially when class is held in a temporary setting, school schedules are changed, and when classmates or other teachers have not returned or have been killed.
- **Communicate with students.** Talk openly with students about their feelings and concerns about the earthquake and the aftermath. Provide accurate information to help clarify misunderstandings and reduce fear. End the discussion with focus on current safety procedures and community recovery activities.
- **Know your students' experiences.** Invite students and parents to tell you about changes in the family or at home so that you can better understand any change in classroom behavior or school work.

- **Share information with others.** Speak with one another and other school staff to share information and monitor how students are doing.
- **Provide structure.** As best as you can, maintain a predictable, structured class schedule with rules and consequences to provide support for your students, even if you are in a new or temporary setting.
- **Help students cope with distress.** Help students develop and use their own coping skills, such as talking to a trusted adult or doing activities like playing with friends, reading, praying, singing, dancing, or doing art.
- **Encourage healthy habits.** Encourage students to drink enough water, eat regularly, and get enough rest.
- **Set limits on emotional outbursts.** It is difficult to have students being irritable or disruptive. Clearly tell students what is expected and reinforce good behavior.
- **Reduce reminders.** Reduce students' exposure to unnecessary reminders of the earthquake. Limit teacher-to-teacher conversations about the earthquake in front of students and discussions about the earthquake during class time.
- **Identify sleep problems.** Tired students often cannot concentrate or learn well and can be irritable with friends and teachers. Encourage students to get as much sleep as possible.
- **Be patient.** Recovery comes in stages over weeks and months. Don't become discouraged because some students take more time than others or have temporary setbacks.
- **Promote helping activities.** Engage students in activities to help rebuild their school community and social life, including projects to improve their school or neighborhood or to help others in their community.
- **Promote tolerance in your classroom.** Students in your class may have been severely affected by the earthquake, including having had serious injury or disfigurement, death of a family member, or living in temporary housing. Help students to be sensitive to others' distress and support each other in positive ways. For example, encourage students to include each other in play, monitor teasing, pair students for activities so that all students are included.

Further information about children, families, and earthquakes can be found at the website of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, www.NCTSN.org.