

Surviving Change: Helping Students after a Crisis

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Goals:

- Understand how trauma can present in different populations, physically and mentally
- Understand the basic components of a child's response to trauma
- Discuss specific interventions that may be useful for school personnel

Trauma

- **Definition –**

- A disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from mental or emotional stress or physical injury
- How does this apply to children? How does a child experience mental or emotional stress?

Case Study

- 10 year old Billy with rapid onset of behavioral concerns: fighting in school, irritability, aggression, difficulty focusing on schoolwork, “meltdowns” in class, tearfulness and constant worries about his mother.
- 17 year old Susan relocated from New Orleans – difficulty adjusting, trouble concentrating, difficulty with memory, apathetic, somatic complaints.

Key Elements of Trauma

- Unpredictability
- Helplessness
- Fear
- Terror

General Responses

- Shock and Surprise
 - Nervousness, hypervigilance
- Fear
 - Difficulty concentrating/focusing, increased worries
- Helplessness
 - Apathy; heightened need for control
- Horror
 - Difficulty sleeping; numbness; flashbacks

Age, stage of development, cultural factors, family and prior experiences affect the ways that children respond to trauma and how they express themselves.

Variables Influencing a Child's Response

- Causes and circumstances of the trauma
 - 1) Level of perceived control or responsibility
 - 2) How it is explained to the child
 - 3) Opportunities to ask questions
- Family Relationship after the trauma
 - 1) Changes in living situation
 - 2) Changes in parenting

Variables Influencing a Child's Response

- Patterns of relationships within the family prior to the trauma
 - 1) Relationship between parents
 - 2) Relationship with the child
- Child's ability to access support and help

Cultural Factors

- Support structure – social networks
- Encouragement to talk about concerns
- Ability to talk about fear
- Language barriers
- Future oriented versus past oriented
- Religious support
- Socio-Economic Status

Ages 6-11 years

- Emotional Responses
 - Fear of feelings
 - Withdrawal from peers, family, favorite activities
 - Emotional outbursts
 - Preoccupation with safety, harm to self and family (play, verbalizations)
 - Self blame
 - Guilt

Ages 6-11 Years

- Behavioral Responses
 - Decline in school performance
 - School avoidance
 - Difficulty focusing
 - Aggression
 - Hyperactive or silly behaviors
 - Whining or clingy behaviors
 - Re-enacting trauma through play
 - Controlling behaviors

Ages 6-11 Years

- Physical Responses
 - Changes in appetite
 - Headaches
 - Stomachaches
 - Sleep problems, nightmares
 - Other general somatic complaints

Ages 12-18 Years

● Emotional Responses

- Loss of interest in peer and social activities, hobbies or recreation activities
- Guilt, self blame
- Sadness, depression
- Anxiety and fears about safety
- Resistance to authority
- Feelings of inadequacy and helplessness
- Desire for revenge
- Interest in reaching out to others affected

Ages 12 to 18

- Behavioral Responses
 - Decline in academic performance
 - Rebellious behavior at home or school
 - Decline in previous responsible behaviors
 - Agitation or decrease in energy level
 - Risk taking behavior
 - Social withdrawal
 - Abrupt shift in relationships

Ages 12 to 18

- Physical Responses
 - Appetite changes
 - Headaches
 - Gastrointestinal problems
 - Skin problems
 - Sleep problems – increase or decrease in fatigue

School Response – Organizational

- Brief Staff about what to expect
- Curriculum changes?
 - Discussions about the trauma
 - Less homework
- Develop a plan for talking to the children
- Consider community support services
- Organize a team to deal with crises
- Establish a “key” person for each child
- Decide what information will be presented - unified

School Response - Initial

- Allow child to walk through school without other students.
- Review school routine with them.
 - Written schedule
- Buddy System
- Allow him/her to meet teachers and look at the text books.
- Encourage questions
- Ask them how much they would like their peers to know.
- Encourage expressive activities.
- Let the child know that you are aware they are having a difficult time.

School Response - Ongoing

- Establish a “safe place” the child can go to at anytime.
- Allow child to be “helpful” – leadership roles to establish a locus of control.
- If he/she is comfortable encourage them to share the experiences.
- Plan to “touch base” in the future and follow up.
- Evaluate child's progress with teachers and family.

Lingering Anxiety – Coping Questions

- Is my fear true now, or in the past?
- Is this a worry or a fact?
- Do I know for sure that this will happen?
- Are there any other possibilities?
- What are things I can do to feel less nervous?
- Are there people around me who will keep me safe?

In Times of Acute Crisis

- Speak slowly and softly
- One or two directives at a time
- Allow them to ask questions
- Provide information
- Model calm
- Allow child to make some decisions
- Ask them what they need
- Provide routine and expectedness

Key Points

- Trauma appears differently based on age and other factors
- Develop a unified approach
 - What information will be given
 - How crises will be handled
- Know that adjustment or readjustment will occur over time
 - Academics
 - Peer and social functioning
- Be flexible

We acknowledge with gratitude the Pennsylvania Legislature for its support of the STAR-Center and our outreach efforts.

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