



STAR-Center LINK

On the web at: www.wpic.pitt.edu/research/star

Fall, 2005

WELCOME! This year marks the 20th anniversary of STAR-Center serving the needs of adolescents and their families throughout the Commonwealth. Thanks to the generosity and support of the Pennsylvania General Assembly, we have offered these services free of charge to youth and their communities within the state. We would also like to express our appreciation to our loyal supporters for utilizing our services and contacting your legislators on our behalf. To celebrate, STAR-Center will be providing you with exciting programs, projects and collaborations throughout the year. Be sure to check out our preview (page 6) of what is in store for this year.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

This issue of the STAR-Center LINK is devoted to helping children in the aftermath of tragic loss. In the wake of the many natural disasters that are currently affecting people across the globe, it is important to hone our skills in working with children who have been traumatized. Two of the articles this month are taken from Project Reassure's website. Information about this helpful site can be found in these articles. Additional resources can be found by visiting their website:

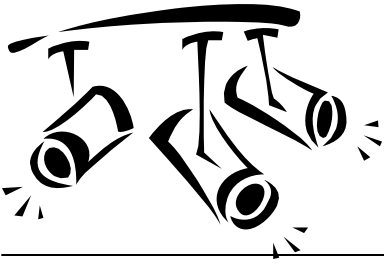
<http://www.projectreassure.org>.

STAR-Center looks forward to working with you this year. As always, please feel free to contact us with suggestions for upcoming STAR-Center LINKS or questions regarding any of our services.

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—Ranisa Rubin, Editor, STAR-Center LINK

S ervices for T eens A t R isk



Project Reassurance, a Hurricane Relief Project

A message from Project Reassurance's volunteer team

A small group of volunteers from STAR-Center, the University of Pittsburgh, and The Watson Institute are working on a collaborative hurricane relief project. We are especially concerned about youth with disabilities, whose needs often are overlooked. A photographer imbedded in an emergency response unit in Louisiana brought this problem to our attention.

We have recruited a team of volunteers made up of crisis responders, editors, mental health specialists, special educators, teachers, graphic and web designers, and students, working together to create resources for those caring for the youngest victims of the Katrina disaster. Volunteers have come forward from across the US; one is Canadian. We are diverse in occupation and age: our volunteers include a retired CFO in Manhattan as well as kindergartners from a local school. These littlest volunteers are making greeting cards to pack with our shipments of handouts. A high school sen-

ior does our graphic design work; another teenager helps with correspondence. A Pitt graduate student does writing and research for the project.

Our resources aid those in schools and other youth-serving agencies who are receiving displaced children and teens. We write our handouts in easy-to-read language so that they will be useful not only to professionals but also to volunteers or untrained laypersons. We have several dissemination avenues: Xerox has donated copying for print distribution; national organizations have offered to disseminate resources through their electronic networks; and, anyone can download resources for free from our website. We have also identified schools in the affected states to receive our handouts.

Our website is www.projectreassurance.org and there you can read the press release, view guidelines for writing and contributions, and see the first resources we have uploaded.

Thank you for helping us to publicize this effort. On the next page is the general announcement that we are sharing within the University and Watson Institute communities: Feel free to copy it and share it with your colleagues and students.



You Can Help The Children Displaced by Hurricane Katrina

Do you want to help the victims of Hurricane Katrina but don't have any money to donate? Would you like to volunteer but don't have the time? We realize that many people may not have the extra income or free time required to help in a disaster relief. Yet, long after the CNN camera crews have gone, thousands of children and teens still struggle to get through each day.

Here's where you come in. Project Reassure is a collaboration between the University's School of Education and The Watson Institute. Students, staff, and faculty members at the University of Pittsburgh are volunteering to write suggestions for interventions or activities to share with those taking care of displaced children and teens. The suggestion could be as simple as a game children can play to take their minds off their distressful situation. We are especially appreciative of ideas suitable for children and teens with special needs. We invite you to share your favorite babysitting tips, clinical strategies, teaching tips, or just your encouragement.

Don't hesitate to make a suggestion just because you are not a professional or a great writer. Many of our best ideas came from people who are not pros or great writers. Children under stress benefit from interested, caring adults. If you like kids and can write a few sentences, your contribution is valuable to Project Reassure. Our website www.projectreassure.org offers some writing tips and background information on helping children in the aftermath of disasters.

We are eager to hear from you. Your suggestion could find its way into the pamphlets we are shipping; might be included in our e-mail distributions to needy states. And it may, in turn, find its way into the heart and life of a traumatized child.



Suggestions for Those Helping Children Displaced by the Hurricane and Floods

Joseph M. Strayhorn, Jr., MD.
Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, University of Pittsburgh

1. Physical needs are of priority.

Water, food, warmth, medical care, a way to get clean.

Sometimes overlooked: protection from aggressive people (adults or children). Also often overlooked: a quiet, dim place to sleep and enough time to sleep, with regular sleeping hours if possible. Please don't make children wait to pee or poop: scared kids sometimes need to go in a hurry.

2. Keep this important psychological goal in mind:

That the child's memories of this experience will help the child know that there are trustworthy and kind people and that it is possible, with help, to handle hardship.

3. Be honest with the child.

Many people are tempted to lie to children to keep them from feeling bad. What's at stake: if

the child hears reassurance that turns out to be false, the child may develop trouble trusting anyone who says that anything is OK. If there is uncertainty about what has happened to a child's loved ones, "I don't know; I wish I could tell you for sure," is better than "They are doing fine." If there is bad news for the child, it should not be put off too long.

When children talk with you about what has gone on, don't feel that you need to give them advice or solve all their problems.

4. Tones of voice are important.

A kind and caring tone of voice is probably more important than the specific words that are spoken. If you are helping to calm a child, speak with low pitch, soft volume, and slow tempo. Sad children need to hear some enthusiastic and positive tones of voice at least some of the time.

5. Help people make friends.

The best defense against fear and grief is having friends. See if you can get children talking with each other and playing with each other. See if the older ones can take younger ones under their wing. If you suggest to kids that they take on the mission of supporting each other, they just might come through. Let them have time away from television. Let the young ones have toy animals and toy people to do pretend play with. Try some cooperative games that give them a common goal.

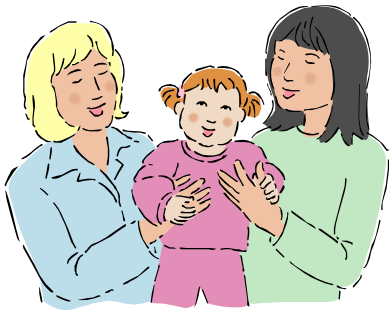
6. Listen.

When children talk with you about what has gone on, don't feel that you need to give them advice or solve all their problems. It's easier to be kind if you don't feel that your job is to make everything right. Sometimes "I'm glad you're talking about this, tell me more," is the best message to give. Sometimes the kindest thing to do is just to nod and keep listening.

Suggestions for Adults Assisting Traumatized Children

Mike Valenti, Project Reassure Volunteer,
Graduate Student, University of Pittsburgh

What denotes a traumatic experience? Individuals experience trauma when they have been exposed—firsthand or in-



directly—to an unexpected event that seriously threatened, injured, or killed someone. After experiencing a traumatic event, children will often display numerous maladaptive behaviors. These behaviors include elevated levels of stressfulness, nervousness, helplessness, irritability, anger, fear, and anxiousness. Children will respond according to their past experiences, age, cognitive abilities, and emotional maturity. In essence, each child will experience a unique reaction to a traumatic event.

Often, adults assisting children

in the aftermath of a crisis do not understand how to appropriately respond to traumatized kids. Untrained adults can inadvertently aggravate children's acute stress reactions instead of reducing them. In addition, the individualized reactions experienced by different children can further confuse adults looking to support and comfort multiple children.

How, then, do adults react to a child responding to trauma? It is important to help children understand that their behaviors are normal and not to label them as mentally unstable. It is comforting for children to know that their reactions are typical. Also, provide as much familiarity as possible. After a crisis, a child's view of the world can be calamitous. Try to keep existing routines intact and surround children with familiar toys and objects to provide reassurance. Finally, to decrease the feeling of helplessness, adults can offer choices to children to help create a sense of mastery. It is always better if children feel like they have control over their situation.

What about addressing traumatized children with special needs? Unfortunately, the current literature addressing children with behavioral or cognitive difficulties is sparse. This is most unfortunate because often the strategies we can use to help typically-developing children manage their behavior may not work with children with special needs. Often children with special needs are prone to experiencing more severe reactions to a stressful situation or crisis.

Children with special needs may experience a "meltdown" in the face of a traumatic event. They may have a difficult time sorting things out and making sense of their world in a crisis. They become over-



whelmed when it becomes too noisy, when there are too many things to look at, or it is too crowded. To calm a child, you
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Preview of STAR-Center 's Year

Here is a preview of what is in store for this year:

Conferences

The 2006 conferences will feature new topics from invited students and presenters. Participants will have a greater choice of breakout sessions and will have the opportunity to attend special all-day training workshops. The dates for the programs are as follows:

King of Prussia

On **Wednesday, March 8th** STAR-Center will be offering two special, experiential Institutes in King of Prussia. Space is limited so please check our website for registration information to be posted.

On **Thursday, March 9th** STAR-Center will return to the Radisson Valley Forge in King of Prussia for our annual conference.

Easton

On **Friday, April 21st** the Colonial IU 20 is once again offering to host our Easton conference.

The date for the Pittsburgh conference is still waiting confirmation but STAR-Center will be back at the William Pitt Student Union on a **Friday in May**. We

have a great line-up of speakers who will be making their first appearances at the conference.

STAR-Center will be sending out a brochure with additional conference and institute details and registration forms in January. This information will also be posted on our website at a later date. Please check back for updates.

Manuals

We are also pleased to announce that many of the STAR-Center manuals are undergoing revision. Updated copies of these manuals will be available for order around the time of our 2006 conferences.



STAR-Center's WEBSITE

Our website is growing! STAR-Center is continuing to update and add to our site to provide viewers with more information. Check back regularly for new articles and presentations on the latest research in the mental health field. We will also be posting some of the presentations from this year's conferences.



STAR-Center LINK

A number of prominent authors have already signed up to contribute feature articles to the STAR-Center LINK. Future topics include: suicide risk factors for gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender teenagers; obsessive compulsive disorder; anxiety; bereavement in schools; and healthy lifestyles for adolescents.

If you are viewing the STAR-Center LINK on our website or receive your copy from a colleague, you can be added to our email distribution list at no charge by visiting our website,

http://www.wpic.pitt.edu/research/star/Newslettersignup_rev.asp

Suggestions for Adults Assisting Traumatized Children

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must first limit the number of people around. Next, let the child try to sort things out on his or her own. Do not try to use punishment to resolve the situation because that will almost certainly make it worse. Safety is another important issue. Not all children will be able to take care of their own needs. You may need to assist them with bodily functions or eating. A final lesson when dealing with children with special needs: do not force them to do anything! If a child is refusing to eat or follow a directive, do not force his or her hand. This will usually result in more intense behaviors such as tantrums or physical aggression.

Whether working with typically-developing children or children with special needs, there is one thing an adult can do that will never be detrimental to a child – we can listen. It is the single most important thing an adult can do when working with a traumatized child. A child will not trust or cooperate with an adult who is inattentive or appears to have selective listening. Listening to a child's wants and needs is paramount.

Services For Teens At Risk
STAR-Center

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Psychiatric Institute and Clinic
3811 O'Hara Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

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Fax: 412-246-5610

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We're on the Web!

www.wpic.pitt.edu/research/star

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