South Carolina Association of School Psychologists

*Supporting Learning and Mental Health of Youth in South Carolina*

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**Guide for the First Week Back to School Following a Crisis**

General Information

Many children who are involved in a crisis event may experience psychological distress. Children/families who had a high degree of disaster exposure and children/families who perceived or experienced the event as life-threatening are typically the most significantly affected.

As a mental health leader in our schools and communities, it will be important to have a sense of the needs in your specific community/school (i.e. How severely affected was your school/community? In general, what experiences has your community experienced related to this natural disaster? Do you work in a school where youth and staff were relatively unaffected? Will you have many new students due to relocating families?).

Assist by conducting an informal needs assessment (which may need to be ongoing during the weeks ahead) to better understand the needs of your specific school/community will be important to your work.

Help your school organize a response team and a response plan to assist those who many need more support. Notify school staff of that plan (example below).

***First Week Back at School***

(Insert statement related to your context) Here is an example from a school in Columbia [*Many of our students lost power, lost water service, and had to evacuate from their homes over the past week. Some will have directly witnessed their yards or homes flooding. Some may still be displaced from their homes. Many may see the destruction, firsthand, for the first time as they return to school*.]

As adults in the school system, we can mitigate students’ distress and promote healing by how we react, by what we say, and by what we do when they return. Students need a supportive, informed response. Some may require time outside of the classroom to cope with their emotions.

Possible Reactions to the Flooding

Many children who are involved in a crisis event may experience psychological distress. Children/families who had a high degree of disaster exposure and children/families who perceived or experienced the event as life-threatening are typically the most significantly affected.

Some of the reactions that our students may experience due to this crisis event include:

Behavioral regression (thumb sucking, bedwetting, fear of dark, clinging to parents), sleep problems/nightmares, changes in eating habits, withdrawal from friends, activities, and routines, depression, anxiety, emotional numbness, irritability, aggressiveness (anger outbursts), disruptive behavior, irrational fears, fear of being left alone or becoming separated from their family, school avoidance, poor concentration, complaints of stomachaches or headaches, and even feeling responsible for what happened.

Boys tend to show more externalizing behaviors whereas girls tend to show more internalizing behaviors.

Please be watchful for these reactions for at least several weeks after students return to school, if not longer. If these reactions are witnessed in a student, please communicate with the student’s parent. Notify the school counselor, social worker, nurse, or psychologist if reactions are impairing a student’s functioning. Of course it is important to continue with positive discipline strategies and continue to provide a safe environment here at school.

First week back plan:

These are the things that we should be doing to help our students transition as quickly as possible back into school:

1. **Greet Every Student**– This means every student entering the school doors and every student entering your classroom.

* Let students know that you missed them and are glad to have them back. The first greeting is not a time to bring up memories from this past week or ask questions.
* Say things like “I am so glad to see you.” “I am so happy you are at school.”
* Refrain from asking “How are you?” “Did you enjoy your week off?” or other similar questions.
* Focus on celebrating that we are back in school, safe, together, and getting back to a routine.

1. **Conduct a Classroom Community Meeting to Discuss Last Week (***below is an example that may need to be adjusted to your context***)**

* Think of **Resiliency and Coping**!!!
* **Give a structure to your meeting** so you can direct it appropriately. Think about:
  + What questions will you ask to promote discussion?
  + How will students take turns.
  + What do students do to indicate they do not want to share.
  + How does a student let you know they need to go talk to someone privately.
  + How long it will last – aim for about 30 minutes but be flexible.  **You don’t want it to be drawn out and become a storytime competition.**
* Let students “pass” if they do not want to or are not ready to share with the group.
* Validate and normalize students’ feelings.
* Highlight how students/families positively coped (left the house to be safe, went to a shelter, accepted help, hugged each other)
  + Students may not be able to identify coping strategies, so you may have to come up with them and point them out.
* Discuss how the community has come together to cope.
* Emphasize that we are safe: first responders, plans in place, community taking care of each other, etc….signs that help kids understand that even though things are different, we are safe.
* Do not let stories get out of hand.
* **Do not** catastrophize the situation, e.g. “Oh you poor thing, that was just horrible, that was terrible, I just wouldn’t have been able to handle it, etc.”
* **If a student becomes overwhelmed with emotion while sharing, take them to a private spot in the room to let them regroup while you notify the front office for help.**

1. **Encourage a Post-Disaster Activity that Promotes Healing and Coping**

* During your classroom community meeting, you **may** want to decide on some type of activity your students can do related to the flood:
  + Thank you note to a family member, first responder, organization, a community member, or government worker who helped during the crisis.
  + A poster of how students helped other people in need.
  + Both of the above.
  + An idea of your own!
* If you do an activity, determine when would be the best time to do it based on how your students are doing. You could embed the activity into your “normal” school day. If your students need a break, you might wait and do it the next school day.

1. **Identify Students Who May be of High Risk**

* (*Insert name of designated point of contact*) will be the point person for students you are concerned about and who are in need of extra support. She will be working with *(Insert names of support personnel)* to cover students’ needs. Additional district staff will also be coming to check on schools to offer help as needed. Students whom you should refer are those who react strongly, are very withdrawn, who self-report a need to talk to someone. If you hear stories that indicate a high degree of student trauma, also make note of that student and give the name to (*Insert name of designated point of contact*).
* Administration and the school response team will be coming around to rooms to check on teachers and students during the day and week.

1. **Begin Your Normal Routine As Soon As Possible**

* The familiarity of a routine will provide a sense of safety and security and will model to your students that we are able to move on.

**Other info to keep in mind as you proceed through your week:**

* For students who need to increase social connections and emotional security, and to decrease isolation, assign roles and responsibilities in classroom for them to do.
* When you are doing crisis-related activities, remember that children cannot deal with intense issues for a long time. Non-crisis related activities such as games, exercise breaks, and routine schoolwork provide a needed break from intense ongoing emotional feelings. **A return to routine school activities is a healthy thing and gives kids a sense of safety and security.** School will be a buffer for some of our students who have been through a lot and go home to a devastated neighborhood, or cannot return home at all.
* **Use the resources already provided through email to help you and guide you for the weeks to come!**

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