

Helping Children Deal with Traumatic Events

During times of trauma, children may need reassurance that their classroom and school are safe places for them. It is important to recognize the needs of individual children who might have a harder time coping with traumatic events than others. Often children who are prone to anxious feelings or those with their own trauma history can be triggered by another traumatic event, even if it did not directly happen to them. In addition to the positive, supportive classroom climate and the social and emotional learning tools that Open Circle provides, some students may need additional time with a school psychologist or guidance counselor to help them manage their fears.

It is also critical that adults get the support they need to help students with their questions and feelings about this tragic event. Modeling how to stay calm and knowing when to ask for help yourself will help reassure students of their safety and remind them that the adults in school will be there to take care of them.

During difficult times, safety, consistency and predictability are critical to helping children maintain a sense of stability and psychological comfort. Open Circle provides a classroom routine and climate that is safe, consistent and predictable. Continuing to do Open Circle, as usual, is very important. Revisiting and applying the following skills and concepts may be one way to help students and adults as they deal with traumatic events.

CALMING DOWN

Being able to apply calming-down techniques is helpful for both children and adults. It is normal and understandable for adults to feel anxious when upsetting things happen, and yet children take their emotional cues from adults. When adults model ways to calm down, they are reinforcing

a critical self-regulation skill. The physiological benefits of calming down are also useful as we try to take care of ourselves during stressful times.

Knowing how to calm down contributes to a child's courage and resiliency. Children are empowered to take charge of their own bodies and emotional reactions. They can use this strategy in and out of the classroom, whenever they feel worried or upset.

UNDERSTANDING FEELINGS

In Open Circle, children learn that people have all kinds of feelings – some feelings may be comfortable or uncomfortable, but all feelings are OK. We are encouraging children to share their feelings and expand the range of feeling words that children can identify. Our emotions give us information about our internal state, and they can pass with time. Children can learn to identify many feelings to best communicate their emotional state, and they can also learn that even uncomfortable feelings don't last forever. We do not need to bring up the tragic event directly to encourage use of feeling words. For example, we can ask, "When you wake in the middle of the night and hear loud thunder, how might you feel? Are there other examples of times when you felt that way?"

Feeling words allow us to let people know in words rather than in actions how we feel and therefore keeps them from misinterpreting, let's them know what's wrong, and helps them to pay attention to our experience. Sharing children's books such as *The Way I Feel*, by Janan Cain, or *Lots of Feelings*, by Shelley Rotner, might be one way to help young children expand their feelings vocabulary beyond "sad" and "mad," so that they can communicate with more accuracy. Some children will have difficulty expressing feelings and say that they are feeling "nothing." This is at times a self-protective strategy when feelings are experienced as too overwhelming. (At other times, children are simply

unaware of their feelings at given moments). We cannot push children to talk about feelings if they do not want to, but rather we can teach the necessary skills and create a safe and caring environment so that when they are ready, they can participate.

SPEAKING UP

Even if children can identify feelings and find feeling words, they are not always comfortable with speaking up and therefore they may not share the feelings they are experiencing. The Open Circle lessons on Speaking Up focus on the importance of speaking up on behalf of oneself and others.

DEALING WITH DOUBLE D BEHAVIOR AND TELLING A RESPONSIBLE ADULT

In Open Circle children are learning to identify at least one adult with whom they can speak if they feel anxious or scared. This lesson also reminds children that when they tell a responsible adult about dangerous or destructive behavior they are keeping themselves and others safe.

LISTENING SKILLS

In times of crisis and stress, children need the support of adults who will really listen to them. In the Open Circle lesson on listening skills, children learn to identify what listening well looks and sounds like and which people are capable of listening to them when they need to be heard.

PROBLEM SOLVING

Some classes might want to find ways to help victims of a tragedy. The process of giving to others is often empowering, as well as helpful. The problem-solving process can guide students as they choose an appropriate way of helping. If your class uses a problem box, keep this box available and remind students that it is anonymous. If you are not comfortable dealing with what a child writes for the problem box, consult with school counselors, administrators and parents.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The National Association of School Psychologists and the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration have excellent resources available in multiple languages for helping children, parents and teachers cope with violence, crisis and traumatic events.