

Educators' Important Role in Supporting Students Experiencing Stress

It is not uncommon for children and youth to show signs of stress months after a disaster or crisis. If left unchecked, chronic stress could develop into more serious mental and behavioral health issues that can interfere with daily life. If children and youth feel unsafe, stressed, or distracted by family issues, they are unable to focus on learning.

Research about the relationship between stress and learning indicates the following:

- Students with internalized emotional distress (e.g., sadness, anxiety, depression) show diminished ability to function academically, and those with externalized distress (e.g., anger, frustration, and fear) exhibit school difficulties including learning delays and poor achievement.
- Students who receive social-emotional support and needed mental health and prevention services have improved educational outcomes (e.g., reduced absences, reduced discipline referrals, and improved test scores).

Schools can provide positive opportunities and supports for children and youth as they deal with stressors related to various disasters or other traumatic events. Administrators, teachers, and staff can help reduce the impact of trauma and stress on children by:

- Recognizing students' atypical behaviors that may indicate a need for additional support;
- Accommodating and responding to students within the classroom setting; and
- Referring children to outside professionals when necessary.

Early intervention that provides coping strategies to children/youth experiencing troubling responses to stressful situations results in improved youth outcomes—the sooner the better. School and community resources should be coordinated to support children and families and provide pathways to additional direct services, when needed.

Meeting the mental health and social and emotional needs of children/youth is a shared responsibility that involves many community stakeholders (e.g., parents and other family members, childcare workers, teachers, school administrators, special education teachers, school psychologists, school nurses, school social workers and counselors, doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, child welfare workers, law enforcement, and the faith community). All of these stakeholders should be considered in developing a system for referral and service coordination as well as shared opportunities for professional development and training.

Educators are ideal connectors to parents/families as they cope with stress. Schools can offer parent information sessions, handouts, newsletter features, and other local media opportunities, providing guidance for parents/families about how they can talk to their children about issues, how to help their children and themselves manage stress, and how to access school and community resources.

As educators reach out to diverse families, they should be sure to identify and connect with nonschool leaders (e.g., faith community leaders) and local community experts who have the respect of the community. It is especially important to consider cultural and linguistic responsiveness in the work with families and children/youth. One must consider:

- Sensitivity to cultural and spiritual beliefs about wellness, illness, and healing
- The potential stigma for some families to acknowledge or discuss mental health issues
- The potential stigma associated with receiving assistance for mental health or substance abuse

- Possible cultural beliefs that it is best to take care of oneself and one's family, and handle problems without the support or intervention from others¹

Culturally responsive communication and support during stressful times makes a significant difference for children, youth, and families. For other tips on working with diverse families, see the [Self-Assessment Checklist for Personnel Providing Services and Supports to Children and their Families](#).

¹ Research on the Relationship Between Mental Health and Academic Achievement, National Association of School Psychologists, 2008 at <http://www.nasponline.org/advocacy/Academic-MentalHealthLinks.pdf>