

# HELPING STUDENTS RECOVER AFTER TRAUMA: CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Information sheet produced for the Victorian Bushfire Support and  
Training for Affected Schools Project

May 2010  
D1.1

This project was funded by the Australian Government.

## Classroom activities

Teachers often ask how they can help young people in their class who have experienced a traumatic event. Being familiar with the types of reactions that young people can have is the first step in being able to help these students. Knowing how to work out if there is something more serious going on, and how to help the young person (and their family) get the assistance that they need, is also particularly important. Beyond that, there are also some things that teachers can do in the classroom to help young people (and their classmates) who have been impacted by traumatic events.

Although some teachers may feel that it is not their role to offer emotional support or that these problems may be too great for teachers to have to deal with, we have shown some interventions that can support children following disasters. In addition, the teacher is in a unique position to monitor children's coping and make referrals when increased support is needed.

Teachers can help their students recover following trauma by:

- Talking about the event: There is often a common misconception that talking about the traumatic event can cause more problems, or cause the young person to develop distress reactions. It is very unlikely that talking about the traumatic event some time after would cause the young person to develop problems. In fact, if the young person does become distressed while talking about the trauma a year later, this is a sign that they may already be experiencing difficulties and may require additional assessment and assistance.
  - Invite the student to talk about how the fires have impacted their family and in what ways have things changed for them.
  - Be sure to focus on positive changes as well as the strengths and positive coping strategies the young person has demonstrated over this time.
  - For younger children, drawing may be easier.
  - Remember, talking to youth about events and how it impacts them shows the young person that you care and that someone is there to support them.
  - For adolescents, peer groups are especially important. Encourage talking with other support people (eg, friends, family members).
- Use a 'buddy' or 'support' system as often as you can.
- Provide safe time out spaces for when it all gets too much.
- Providing choices – regaining control. Often, during the traumatic event, young people may feel a sense of loss of control. Providing young people with choices, or input into some classroom decisions can help restore their feeling of control.
- Set clear and firm limits/expectations of behaviour: Although it is reasonable to adjust expectations about the young person's behaviours following trauma, it is important that children understand that they can not use this as an excuse to get away with inappropriate behaviour. It is important for teachers to set clear expectations of behaviours (and when these change) and to communicate these to the young person.
- Anticipate difficult times and plan ahead for anniversaries or important milestones
- Prepare children and adolescents for situations which may trigger reactions such as fire drills, activities or content.
- Focus on strengths and positives.
- Help students to build a support system.
- Maintain routines.

## AUSTRALIAN CHILD & ADOLESCENT TRAUMA, LOSS & GRIEF NETWORK

As a teacher, you can address issues arising following trauma by:

- *Business as usual:* In the immediate post disaster environment it is evident that re-establishing routines to as 'normal' a situation as possible is a focus for families and educators. Re-establishing school routines are beneficial in many ways. In the long term however post traumatic reactions can interfere with a child's functioning particularly in the area of memory and attention. Unless these symptoms are addressed the child will continue to have escalating problems in their academic functioning which will result in poor outcomes for the student, difficulties in managing classroom behaviour and disruption for other students.
- *Adaptation of existing program to address factual issues:* Schools may choose to adapt their existing program to incorporate education about the disaster. This is based on the premise that one of the roles of educators post-disaster is to provide children with accurate information and knowledge about the event. The existing curriculum can be adapted to:
  - Include scientific data about weather patterns, drought, flood, fire, bush and forest management practices, indigenous management of the land, history of disaster in the area
  - Examination of the post disaster environment such as regeneration, salinity, erosion
  - Exploration of preventative measures.

These practices incorporate children's experiences into the existing curriculum and can also be used as a basis of preparation for emergencies and disasters.

- *Unplanned responses:* Although some schools might prefer to adopt a business as usual approach sometimes unplanned, spontaneous or student-initiated activities occur in classrooms addressing aspects of the disaster. These include telling stories about the disaster or their personal experiences, discussing the event with the teacher or their peers, writing stories or student diaries with content describing the event, or drawing pictures.

It is difficult to restrict these activities in the classroom. In contrast, these spontaneous events can be used to explore positive outcomes, such as changes in their environment and post traumatic growth since the disaster. They can also be used to address planning and training for future emergencies.

Teachers can respond to these unplanned activities and offer emotional support for their students by:

- Letting the child know they can talk with them
- Letting the child know that help is available
- Increasing the child's social connectedness by using a buddy system or by helping to facilitate social connectedness
- Monitoring and maintaining a safe environment, both within the classroom and outside it
- Talking with parents
- Introducing classroom activities to provide support and follow-up.