

Giving Back the Gift of Hope: A Guide for Educators Helping the Child Survivors of Hurricane Katrina

In the aftermath of a natural disaster, the road toward healing and recovery can feel overwhelming, both for the survivors *and* their caregivers. Hurricane Katrina has led many to feel this way, as media coverage of the devastating impact clearly point to the enormous tasks that lie ahead in helping the survivors re-build their lives. At the same time, the recent outpouring of financial, material and emotional support from individuals, communities and institutions nationwide and internationally are clear signs that many people want to reach out and give the survivors the gift of hope – the single, most important gift they need to start re-building their lives.

The Role of Teachers and Educators

Teachers and educators play a crucial role in helping one of the most psychologically vulnerable groups of the hurricane's survivors: the children and the youth. The daily academic routine that teachers provide is, in itself, a great mechanism for normalizing the disrupted lives of student-transferees and bringing back a sense of predictability and security in their lives. In addition, the different learning opportunities that teachers and other educators provide inside and outside the classroom are powerful tools to help young survivors re-discover their competencies and strengths. These inner resources will empower them to deal more effectively with their disaster experience and eventually move on.

It is important for teachers and educators to recognize that they already possess some of the *natural* resources and institutional mechanisms that can help them aid young survivors of the hurricane. That being said, it is equally important to recognize that teachers can burn out and potentially display signs of emotional/psychological trauma because of constant exposure to the painful stories of their student survivors. The latter is called *vicarious traumatization*; a phenomenon that frequently occurs among caregivers of traumatized survivors but one that is seldom addressed effectively. In all probability, teachers will begin to display, at some point, similar symptoms to their student survivors. Thus, it is very important that even before teachers begin to help traumatized students, they should draw up concrete plans, structures, and strategies to address anticipated burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious traumatization. Some of these strategies may include:

- *Actively engaging in regular self-care strategies.* It is important to lead a healthy lifestyle when one deals with traumatized survivors. Get enough rest, eat and drink healthy foods, and get adequate physical exercise. It is also important to plan for regular breaks and engage in enjoyable activities such as taking 15-minute walks, watching a good movie, spending time with family and friends, or focusing on a hobby that restores their positive energies.

- *Organizing support groups to address issues of vicarious traumatization.*

Teachers need to work as a team. It is important that they feel comfortable about expressing their need for help, and be assured of one another's support. Teachers can plan for regular meetings to address their own issues of burnout and/or vicarious traumatization and, where feasible, obtain the help of a professional who can facilitate processing their issues. Teachers also need to feel that someone else can take care of them.

- *Institutional support for promoting teacher well being and effectiveness.*

Administrators also need to fully recognize the reality of vicarious traumatization among teachers who are helping student survivors of the hurricane. It is important to create or use existing structures within their academic institutions that can concretely offer support to their teachers, such as holding seminars that can further expand teachers' knowledge and skills about handling children's trauma from natural disasters; acknowledging the need for regular support group meetings among teachers; creating clear, accessible partnerships with other professionals and professional organizations to obtain the additional support that teachers need as they try to assimilate displaced students.

When teachers and educators recognize and concretely prepare to handle issues of vicarious traumatization, they can respond to the needs of students more

effectively in the long run. If, from the start, teachers are empowered to deal with their own issues, they naturally become, in the impressionable eyes of the young survivors, *powerful* anchors and models of hope.

Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms of Trauma

The experience of being displaced and losing a whole way of life to a natural disaster like Hurricane Katrina can be very traumatic, especially for children who also have to deal with the loss of family and friends. The experience of the hurricane was understandably traumatic because the extent of its damage was unexpected; people were caught unprepared and were therefore at a loss on how to deal with it.

The signs and symptoms of trauma may continue long after the disaster is over, when survivors have re-settled to a safer place. Very broadly, there are three common signs seen in persons suffering from trauma:

- *Re-experiencing the traumatic event.* Trauma survivors often have difficulty concentrating, because they are distracted by recurrent thoughts or images of the traumatic event, and may feel and act agitated/distressed when exposed to anything that reminds them of the tragedy. Sometimes, they talk about the past event as though it is still happening in the present, as though they are seeing it up close and right before their eyes. In children,

re-experiencing may come in the form of persistent unexplained nightmares and bedwetting days after the event has occurred, or persistent, unexplained physical complaints (e.g., stomach aches, dizziness and headaches that cannot be attributed to any physiological causes).

- *Avoiding memories of the trauma at any cost.* Traumatized survivors often try to ‘shut out’ even the most remote reminders of the traumatic incident. They may avoid going to places or doing activities that bring back feelings of distress about the event; they go to great lengths to avoid talking about the incident, or even thinking about it. Many of them become socially withdrawn. Physically, their entire bodies (or some of their body parts) may begin to feel numb whenever memories of the traumatic event re-surface. Some of them may not even be able to recall what happened, or totally ‘forget’ that they went through the trauma at all.
- *Being constantly anxious and/or easily agitated.* This is also known as *hyperarousal*. The person is easily startled and often responds in an exaggerated way (e.g., suddenly running away at the sound of water gushing from a sink). After the traumatic event, the person may not be able to fall or stay asleep, be more irritable than usual and display mood swings or even misbehave in ways that are not typical of them. Children may cling

to their parents and refuse to go to school, and display persistent fears related to the disaster, e.g., losing their parents.

The above general signs of trauma may last anywhere from one month to several years. Any or all these signs may be present in varying degrees. The more symptoms are displayed, the greater is the likelihood that the person's traumatic distress is more serious. Also, the general symptoms of psychological trauma in children/youth manifest differently from adult symptoms and vary according to the young person's developmental stage. It is thus important to know how to spot the more age-specific signs of trauma in children so that teachers can also respond to them in age-appropriate ways.

In children 6 years and younger, teachers may encounter the following behaviors:

- Generalized helplessness that may be expressed frequently in statements such as "I can't do it or I can't do anything."
- Passivity and loss of interest in playing.
- Overcompliance.
- Asking the same questions over and over. They may be trying to understand and younger children often repeat inquiries because they expect everything will return to normal because they can't understand the concept of permanent loss and may believe the disaster is reversible.
- Regressing to infantile behavior, e.g., thumb-sucking, heightened separation anxiety with parents and crying, clinging to parents and refusing to go to school for fear of losing them.

- Re-enacting the traumatic event over and over again in their art and play themes (e.g., repeatedly drawing images of the flood; building houses that are knocked down over and over again by a storm). Since young children have limited capacities for language, the symptom of re-experiencing the trauma is often seen in the way they express themselves through their art and play.
- Reported nightmares.
- Disruptive and hyperactive behavior in the classroom, or unusually frequent temper tantrums.
- Loss of appetite, and/or complaints of stomachaches and headaches that cannot be medically explained.

Among children in the 7-12 year old range, teachers may notice the following symptoms:

- Shortened or variable attention span and difficulty concentrating. In addition, if the child also displays hyperactivity, he/she can be mistakenly labeled as having Attention Deficit with Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).
- A sudden drop in grades and academic performance
- Refusal to go to school for fear that something bad might happen to their family while they're away.
- Spacing out in the classroom or looking dazed.
- Being extremely wary or fearful.
- Reported nightmares.
- Magical thinking and fantasizing, e.g., claiming that the hurricane never happened, or that they have special powers/abilities to stop another hurricane from happening.

- A loss of interest in studying, making friends or engaging in extracurricular activities; or heightened irritability and mood swings.
- Inappropriate or incongruent affect: laughing in the face of a scary or sad event, or smiling as they say, “I feel very sad.”
- Physical complaints such as dizziness, headaches, stomach aches or skin rashes that have no explainable causes.

Teen-agers (13-17 year-old age group) can display similar signs of traumatic stress as those in the 7-12 year-old group. In addition, they can also display any or a combination of the following behaviors:

- Being emotionally detached and acting “cool” or adult-like, as though they do not need any help.
- Crying spells for no apparent reason.
- Even teenagers may return to earlier ways of behaving.
- Intense feelings of guilt that they survived while other friends or relatives died during the disaster (this is the phenomenon of *survivor guilt*). In extreme cases, the guilt may lead to depression, self-destructive behaviors such as engaging in drugs and alcohol and recurrent thoughts of suicide; or violent and aggressive behavior that is triggered even by minor irritants. In the case of the latter, the traumatized teen-ager has difficulty controlling his/her anger.
- Social withdrawal, often rooted in feelings of being alone, feeling stigmatized as a victim or ‘refugee’, and feeling ashamed of one’s experience. Young survivors of Hurricane Katrina, particularly older children who have watched a lot of the news coverage, may also feel stigmatized by their race and social class.

What Teachers Can Do

The most important things that teachers and educators can do in the initial stages of caring for their young, traumatized students are to provide them with a *sustained sense of safety* and to *validate their feelings*. Only under these conditions can teachers help traumatized children, especially the young survivors of Hurricane Katrina, *re-discover* their inner strengths, believe in themselves again and move on toward recovery. The process requires teachers to be *very patient* and to *tolerate* witnessing the pain that their students may disclose. The process may also feel like a rollercoaster many times, and the pace of recovery will depend on the child's personality and existing resources. But if teachers and school administrators create support systems within their own institutions and network with other professionals, the task of helping student survivors recover from their trauma can be made more manageable and effective.

Here are some concrete guidelines that can help teachers create an atmosphere of safety and acceptance inside and outside the classroom. They are by no means exhaustive, but they do provide some solid basics that teachers can use in helping students recover from their hurricane trauma:

- Recognize that the regular academic schedule in school helps establish routine and predictability, and therefore a sense of safety in children at all developmental stages. Teachers can maximize the use of routine to help their student survivors regain a sense of normalcy and safety.
- Provide extra reassurance that the child is now in a safe place. Hug young children (and even teen-agers) when they express the need for it, and

constantly remind them that it is safe for them to express their concerns and feelings. (Hugging will depend on school policy, of course.)

- Be firm and consistent with limit-setting, especially for children who display uncontrollable bursts of anger, and frame it always within the context of maintaining safety: “That’s not safe for you or for the others; we need to find a safer way for you to do/say things...” It is important for teachers to understand that traumatized children may internally feel that things are out of control, including their emotions and behavior. Their bursts of uncontrolled behavior are deep cries for the need to be kept safe and to regain a sense of order and control.
- Be a model for expressing negative feelings appropriately, constructively and genuinely inside and outside the classroom. When traumatized students see and perceive that you are authentic about the way you feel, this encourages them to also express their own pent-up feelings about their disaster experience.
- Take the cue from your students -- follow their lead. Tune-in to what they say, ask, write or do. Many times, the statements and questions they make in class can provide teachers a window into their inner world as disaster survivors. In particular, teen-agers’ statements in class are often their subtle way of opening a door for the teacher to enter into their world. When this happens, follow-through right away. React to their statements and answer their questions thoughtfully, truthfully and with a deep sense of respect. In this way, teachers can effectively ‘connect’ and build positive rapport with their student survivors, and thus give them courage to eventually talk more openly about their experiences.
- When students start talking about their hurricane experiences, listen attentively and be prepared to tolerate the pain you hear from them. If you can tolerate your students’ pain, then they will also be able to hurdle through their pain of mourning and loss better. The opportunity to disclose their feelings to someone who *genuinely* listens and accompanies them through the process of mourning also diminishes their feelings of shame over time. In addition, *validate* your students’ feelings. *Affirm* how natural it is for them to have such feelings after what they have been through, how anyone in their place, including you, would probably feel the same way. Do *not* cut

them off, brush them aside, or minimize what they say (e.g., “Oh, you’ll get over that soon, I’m sure”) – because it may push them to withdraw further. Be sure to connect and refer to school and private counselors, as well as using those resources yourselves.

- Remain calm and collected when you listen to the stories of your student survivors. Young people look to the grown-ups for strength. If they see that you become anxious or agitated when they share their experience, they may feel unsafe about upsetting you and refuse to ever talk again about their pent-up feelings.
- When drawing out your students’ thoughts and feelings, ask open-ended questions to allow them to more freely express themselves. For instance, instead of asking, “Was that a scary experience for you?” it would be better to ask, “What was that experience like for you?” This is particularly helpful with teen-agers who need to be able to *name* their own feelings. Among children in the 7-12 year-old group, classroom activities can be designed around simulated situations that elicit what they will probably think, feel and do if such an experience happened to them. And with very young children aged 6 and under, the provision of adequate art materials and toys such as doll houses, rescue figures, toy soldiers, and town/city models can also encourage greater self-expression about their disaster experience.
- Let them take the lead. You don’t want to make the tragedy the center of their identity. On the other hand, if all conversation about it is avoided, they may think it’s something they should be ashamed of or hide.
- Let your students know that they are *not* responsible for the hurricane. This is particularly helpful for young children, who tend to feel that they caused something bad to happen. A science class, for instance, can be an appropriate venue for learning the facts about disasters like hurricanes and clearly communicating to young minds that they are not responsible for the event.
- As your student survivors become more open about sharing their losses from the hurricane, you may find some of them deeply caught in their pain to the point of not being able to function properly. When this begins to happen, remember to provide a *balance* between giving them the time to talk about their disaster experience and giving them other activities that can distract

them or draw out more positive feelings. For instance, you may want to start putting a time limit to your student's sharing about his/her hurricane losses and gently explain, "I understand how you feel and I am here to listen to you and be with you. At the same time, I want you to remain safe and keep you from feeling trapped in your pain so that you can also do other important and enjoyable things. I think it's important to put a balance to your life, too. So let's give you time to talk about your memories on one hand, and when we finish, let's talk also about other things that you enjoy or may want to do, okay?" When teachers set time limits and communicate this within the context of concern for one's personal safety, student survivors can begin to learn a *crucial* skill in dealing with their traumatic memories: the skill of *effectively managing their emotions*.

- Engage students in activities that can give them positive experiences of themselves, e.g., helping in clean-up time for young children, engaging in sports or in extracurricular activities that tap the gifts/talents of older children. Among teen-agers, it may be particularly important to engage them in activities where they can feel a greater positive sense of belonging with peers. Praise and affirm your students when they have a sense of enjoyment and/or achievement from these activities.
- Tap your own students (those who did not directly experience the hurricane) as *partners* in helping the student survivors. While they will also probably need to have a basic understanding of psychological trauma and its effects, asking them for suggestions and ideas on how you can all help the student survivors feel safe and accepted can make the process of helping more energizing, creative, and effective. This strategy is particularly helpful with teenage populations, who tend to prefer opening up to their peers more than to the grown-ups or authority figures.
- Acknowledge and respect your own professional limits as a teacher. It is important that you maintain a clear sense of your skills, and how far you can help student survivors in their recovery process. If you are at a loss on how to handle a student survivor's symptoms of trauma or discover that your student has had other traumatic experiences that you may not be equipped to address effectively, be proactive and refer your student to a professional. It is important that teachers and educators have a ready list of professionals that can be contacted in the area for added help and support.

The challenge for educators is to find *creative ways of integrating* their existing resources with their enhanced knowledge and skills for dealing with students who survived the wrath of Hurricane Katrina. Rising up to this challenge entails systematic planning and a *sustained* level of commitment on personal and institutional levels. But through the help of teachers and other educators, the young survivors of Hurricane Katrina can regain their sense of safety and feelings of competence again. In the process, the young survivors may find that what lies deeper beneath their pain is the hope for their future. When they re-discover that gift of hope and begin to show signs of healing and recovery, dedicated teachers can stand back in awe and gratitude for having taken an active role in their students' growth. The sense of reward they will feel, at that point, will be irreplaceable.

References, Resources and Links

Books

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Disaster handouts and links. In David Baldwin's Trauma Information Pages (<http://www.trauma-pages.com/pg5.htm>)

Suggested Activities For Integrating Displaced Students.

The activities listed below can be reconfigured for various age groups. Educators know their students and have a strong sense of what is appropriate. These are only suggestions and we defer to your expertise regarding what will be most helpful.

Introductions

Assimilating students into a school where friendships are already in place and classes have already begun, is a major challenge. Try introductory exercises that, not only help the assimilating kids, but encourage children who already know each other to learn something new about one another.

My Name and How I Feel About It. For instance, “my name is Louisa and I was named after my grandmother who I really loved so it feels special.” Or, “my name is John Ridge the third and it feels like a burden because the first and second John Ridges were very successful.” Or, “I’m Brittany and everyone calls me Spears even though I can’t sing or dance. It’s a pain.”

What Is Your Fantasy Accomplishment? If you didn’t ever have to worry about skill, talent, age, or money – what would you like to do some day?

Introduce One Another. Have 2 students interview each other and, then, introduce their partners to the class. Or, they can tell a story about the other student which may include “what makes them happy, what they like to do, what their strengths are, what school routines they like, what their traditions and memories are, etc.” The teacher can explain that it’s also a lesson in listening and speaking. The other students can show their listening skills by commenting on the stories.

What Ideas Would You Like To Incorporate Into The Classroom? This gives the new students a chance to bring some of their traditions to their adopted setting. The teacher doesn’t have to accept them all. Have them come up with a number of ideas and the teacher can choose one.

Buddies – or Ambassadors - For New Students. Someone who can answer questions, show them around, and be a support. There can be many for one student: one for academics, one for the lunchroom, another for touring the building, etc.

Getting Ready Ahead of Time. If possible, have the student's desk, cubbies, and areas already labeled with their names. Perhaps the other children can make a welcome sign or a special welcoming gift.

Names. Either have the kids all wear nametags or show their names on their desks until the new students learn them.

Pass The Ball or Bean Bag. When it gets to you, say your name and favorite activity...or anything else that comes to mind.

Fun" Get To Know You Better" or Bonding Activities

Line Up. Have the kids line up in order of their birthdays, from oldest to youngest. But, they are not allowed to speak or make any verbal signs. They cannot write and they cannot use their fingers to show numbers. Soon they communicate through tapping, using things in the room, or a lot of innovative communicative vehicles. They're delighted when they get so many right. And, it's just as difficult for the old students as it is for the new ones.

One- Minute Fairy Tales. Divide the class into groups (4 or 5 students each.) They have to perform a well-known fairy tale of their choice but they have to do it within one minute – beginning with "Once Upon A Time" and ending with "They Lived Happily Every After." They're usually very funny. Then, they have to do it again in 30 seconds. And, a third time in 10 seconds. They feel great about pulling together and accomplishing a seemingly impossible task.

Sharing Time. A regularly scheduled circle where all students can participate, but it is also ok to pass. It doesn't have to be what a student did. It may be a story or book, or a movie, or perhaps just a thought.

M & M's. Give each student 5 different colored M & M's. Assign a description to each. Blue might be to share something about yourself you like; Red, something you hope for; Yellow, something you'd like to change; and so on. Again, it's ok to pass.

2 Truths and a Lie. Have each student come up with two truths and one lie about themselves. It's up to the rest to guess which ones are true and which are not. It can be very funny.

Gibberish. This is a way for new and old students to have fun together and meet (or not meet) a challenge. Give the students a topic to discuss among themselves – a movie or upcoming event, for instance. Then, stop them and tell them that they have to have the same conversation with the same manner, tone, and gestures replacing the real conversation with one about vegetables, animals, or objects. It cracks them up.

The Continuous Story. Everyone sits in a circle. One person starts the story with a sentence. The next adds a sentence and so on around the circle until the story is finished.

What Was The Best Part of the Day? At the end of every day, ask the question. You might follow up with, “and what did you have to do with it?” so they can realize that they contribute to positive happenings.

Literature

Child and adolescent literature – chosen for specific developmental and intellectual stages – can help students realize commonalities and feel knowledgeable, as well as comforted by familiarity. For instance, find authors who write about regions and African American culture – if that is your audience – so that they can see all of their history has not been obliterated. Reading aloud to children, and allowing for open dialogue, is a first step to knowing something about the child and being able to respond appropriately.

Helping Others. This should only happen if the incoming students want it. A number of classes, who have assimilated displaced children, have organized fundraisers to help other victims. It is empowering for all and the sense of being overwhelmed can decrease because, finally, they are actually doing something!

Building Self Esteem. Find out the talents, skills, and abilities of the new students and get them into activities where they can be successful: on a team, in a play, creating art, helping teachers, in the band or chorus, etc. If it's too late to join or they don't come with good enough grades, bend the rules. These children desperately need to experience success.

Where possible, find ways that the children can gain mastery and control. It may simply mean giving them choices or taking a leadership position. They have just experienced the ultimate in powerlessness. They need a sense that they have some influence.

Relaxation Exercises. All students and teachers, alike, can use this. It doesn't have to be a major effort or take a lot of time, but devote a few minutes throughout the day to reducing stress.

These are just a few suggestions. Ask your colleagues or – better still – ask the students to create activities that are welcoming and inclusive.

And, remember – it is not necessary to achieve perfection. These students will appreciate the effort far more than the result.