Supporting children in times of crisis

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www.grievingstudents.org

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Outline of Presentation

• How to support children after a disaster
• Symptoms of adjustment reactions
• Timeline for adjustment
• Professional self-care

Psychological first aid

• Provide broadly to those impacted
• Supportive services to foster normative coping and accelerate natural healing process
• All staff should understand likely reactions and how to help children cope

• Anyone that interacts with children can be a potential source of assistance and support – if unprepared, they can be a source of further distress
PFA Actions (source: American Red Cross)

- Observation or awareness
- Make a connection
- Help people feel comfortable and at ease
- Be kind, calm, & compassionate
- Assist with basic needs
- Listen
- Give realistic reassurance
- Encourage good coping
- Help people connect
- Give accurate and timely information
- Suggest a referral resource
- End the conversation

Basic needs are basic

- UWF (Brief Therapy)
- Need to deal with basic needs before able to address emotional needs
  - Safety, security
  - Food, shelter
  - Communication and reunification with family
- Staff have their own basic needs
  - Crisis plans need to address them as a priority
Potential symptoms of adjustment reactions

- Sleep problems
- Separation anxiety and school avoidance
- Anxiety and trauma-related fears
- Difficulties with concentration
- Deterioration in academic performance
- Regression
- Depression; Avoidance of previously enjoyed activities
- Substance abuse
- Somatization

Post-traumatic stress disorder

- Exposure to death, serious injury, or sexual violence
- Re-experiencing traumatic event
  - Recurrent, intrusive, distressing memories
  - Recurrent, distressing dreams
  - Dissociative reactions (e.g., flashbacks); post-traumatic play
- Avoidance of stimuli associated with trauma
- Negative alterations in cognitions and mood
- Increased arousal
  - Difficulty concentrating or sleeping
  - Irritability or anger
  - Self-destructive behavior
  - Hypervigilance or exaggerated startle
Range of reactions to crisis

- Wide range of reactions and concerns
  - Not just PTSD
- Bereavement
- Secondary losses and stressors
  - Relocation
  - Loss of peer network
  - Academic failure
  - New social network
  - Financial stresses
  - Parental stress, mental health problems
  - Marital conflict or domestic violence
- One crisis often awakens feelings related to pre-existing or past crisis

Parents often underestimate symptoms

- Children may withhold complaints because of concerns they are abnormal, or to protect parents who are upset
- Parents may not think professionals are interested or assume “normal reactions to abnormal event”
- Stigma related to mental illness
Adjustment Over Time in Crisis

A = baseline functioning
B = event
C = vulnerable state
D = usual coping mechanisms fail
E = helplessness, hopelessness
F = improved functioning
G = continued impairment
H = return to baseline
I = post-traumatic growth

Importance of professional self-care

• Recognize it is distressing to be with children who are in distress
• It’s critical staff find ways to have their own personal needs met and appreciate and address impact of supporting children who are grieving or traumatized
• Create a culture where:
  – it is ok to be upset
  – members normalize asking for help and model willingness to accept assistance
National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

Initial Funding: September 11th Children’s Fund & National Philanthropic Trust; Current support: New York Life Foundation

- Promote appreciation of role schools can serve to support students, staff, and families at times of crisis and loss
- Enhance training in professional education programs
- Serve as resource for information, training materials, consultation and technical assistance – provided at no charge to schools
- www.schoolcrisiscenter.org

Partial list of NCSCB resources

- Parent guide on supporting a grieving child (New York Life Foundation)
- Guidelines for addressing death of student or staff in school (including suicide)
- Psychological first aid
- Guidance on addressing anniversary of crisis
- Guidance document for school security staff

www.schoolcrisiscenter.org
www.achildingrief.com

After a loved one dies—
How children grieve and how parents and other adults can support them.

On-line learning module

National Center for Disaster Medicine and Public Health (Psychosocial Impacts of Disasters on Children)

http://ncdmph.usuhs.edu/KnowledgeLearning/2013-Learning2.htm
Coalition to Support Grieving Students

- American Federation of School Administrators (AFSA)
- American Federation of Teachers (AFT)
- American School Counselors Association (ASCA)
- National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)
- National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)
- National Association of School Nurses (NASN)
- National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)
- National Education Association (NEA)
- School Social Workers Association of America (SSWAA)
- School Superintendents Association (AASA)