

## **Suggestions to help Children Cope with a Critical Incident**

### **Information Sheet 4: for teachers**

Whenever a tragedy occurs, children, like many people, may be confused or frightened. Most likely they will look to adults for information and guidance on how to react. School personnel can help children cope first and foremost by establishing a sense of safety and security. As more information becomes available, adults can continue to help children work through their emotions and perhaps even use the process as a learning experience.

#### **Immediately following a Critical Incident all adults should:**

**Model calm and control.** Children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives. Avoid appearing anxious or frightened.

**Reassure children that they are safe** and (if true) so are the other important adults in their lives. Depending on the situation, point out factors that help ensure their immediate safety and that of their community.

**Remind them that trustworthy people are in charge.**

#### **As time passes, it is important to:**

**Let children know that it is okay to feel upset.** Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy like this occurs. Let children talk about their feelings and help put them into perspective. Children may need help and patience from adults to assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately.

**Tell children the truth.** Don't try to pretend the event has not occurred or that it is not serious. Children will be more worried if they think you are too afraid to tell them what is happening.

**Stick to the facts.** Don't embellish or speculate about what has happened and what might happen. Don't dwell on the scale or scope of the tragedy, particularly with young children.

**Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.** Younger children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that the daily structures of their lives will not change. Older children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what is being done at their school. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. Teenagers may have strong and varying opinions. For all children, encourage them to verbalise their thoughts and feelings. Be a good listener!

**Observe children's emotional state.** Depending on their age, children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behaviour, appetite, and sleep patterns

can also indicate a child's level of grief, anxiety or discomfort. Children will express their emotions differently. There is no right or wrong way to feel or express grief.

**Look for children at greater risk.** Children who have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, suffer from depression or other mental illness, or with special needs may be at greater risk of severe reactions than others. Be particularly observant for those who may be at risk of self harm or suicide. Seek the help of a mental health professional if you are at all concerned.

**Monitor your own stress level.** Don't ignore your own feelings of anxiety, grief, and anger. Talking to friends, colleagues, family members, religious leaders, and mental health counsellors can help. It is okay to let your pupils know that you are sad, but that you believe things will get better. You will be better able to support your pupils if you can express your own emotions in a productive manner. Get appropriate sleep, nutrition, and exercise.

### **What teachers can do:**

**Focus on your pupils' responses over the week following the tragedy.** Try to help them understand what has happened, keeping in mind their developmental level.

**Make time to talk.** Remember if you do not talk to your pupils about this incident someone else will. Take some time and determine what you wish to say.

**Be available.** Your physical presence will reassure your pupils and will give you the opportunity to monitor their reactions. Younger children might want physical contact.

**Maintain a typical routine in the classroom *but don't be inflexible*.** Your pupils may have a hard time concentrating on schoolwork.

**Consider thinking hopeful thoughts for the victims, survivors and their families.** It may be a good time to write a poem, write a letter, complete craft activities or draw a picture to help the children express their feelings and feel that they are somehow supporting the victims, survivors, and their families.