When Children Face Disaster: The Role of Literacy

Tips for Parents and Teachers

Tips for Parents

Disasters can be especially traumatic for children. They turn to adults, particularly their parents, for support, comfort and reassurance that they are safe. How can you help your child in the face of disaster? What can you do to ensure your child has opportunities to express his emotions, ask questions, and understand what has happened?

The many aspects of literacy—talking, listening, reading, writing, drawing—provide a common ground on which parents and children can stand and a foundation upon which to begin the healing process following a disaster. Here are some things you can do with your child that will help him cope with disaster.

Maintain Normal Routines

Children need—and like—structure in their lives. As quickly as possible after a disaster, return to the routines that your family followed before the event. Re-establish normal eating, bathing, play and bed times and set the same limits on your children's behavior as before the disaster. Just as importantly, set aside time when you and your child spend moments snuggling, talking, playing games, reading and writing. This will give children a sense of security and help them return to the safe feeling they had before the disaster. And it will give children happy memories to hold on to in future years.

Talk…and Listen

Children need opportunities to talk about what has happened. Talking about their concerns and fears helps them understand their own feelings. Listen to what they say—don't interrupt them. Answer their questions honestly and let them know if you don't know the answer. Ask your child to tell you his version of what happened. You might help him think of the sequence of events. What happened first? Then what? And after that? Sometimes children have misunderstandings about what has happened because they don't know the meanings of some of the words they hear (i.e., storm surge, arson, spiral formation, after shock). You can explain the meanings of the words to your child and talk about how they are used by newscasters and others who talk about the disaster.

Read Together

Nothing will make your child feel more secure than snuggling next to you listening to a familiar story or book. Having fun while reading aloud with your child helps her think of reading as a pleasurable activity—one that she will continue as she grows older. Listening to and participating in favorite stories

and books reassures your child that some things don't change. Hearing stories about families, children or animals who confront their challenges helps your child realize that others face problems and that problems can be overcome. As you read and talk about these stories, point out to your child what she has done in the past to overcome her fears and anxieties—i.e., climbing to the top of the slide, ducking her head underwater, and attending the first day of child care.

Write

Some children find it hard to voice their fears and anxieties. Many of these children find writing an easier way to express their feelings. An older child might want to write in a personal journal. This can give him a chance to organize his thoughts and express the fears he may not want to admit to others. It gives him a freedom to say what he wants without judgment and may provide him with a powerful view of his journey through his fears later. Younger children who have family members or friends affected by a disaster might want to write them a note of comfort and concern. Writing a story about the disaster can give your child an outlet for venting feelings and can give you an insight into what your child is really thinking and feeling. When children use writing as a means of expressing their emotions, they are polishing a skill that will last them a lifetime.

Draw Pictures

Drawing can help your child confront her fears and provide a window into what she is thinking and feeling. Your child's art often expresses concepts she isn't able to talk about. When asked what she thinks about what has happened, a young child may not be able to answer, but she can show how she feels in a painting or drawing. Provide some pencils, pens, colored pencils, crayons or paints and paper. Ask your child to draw a picture of how the disaster has affected her—of how she feels about what is happening now, after the disaster. Ask her to tell you about the picture and ask her some questions about her drawing. Write down what she says and let her help you write a story about the drawing that you can read and talk about later. If your child likes to draw, you also can encourage her to draw pictures for friends or family members as a way to cheer them up and encourage them.

Sing Songs and Recite Poems

Singing familiar songs and reciting familiar poems are fun and let your child know that no matter how severe the disaster you faced, having fun together is still important. Have fun with the rhymes in both songs and poems. Pause and let your child fill in the missing words at the end of rhyming lines or fill in new rhyming words. See how many animals you can sing about in "Old McDonald's Farm" or use family names in the "Name Game" song.

Sally, Sally, bo-bally,
Banana-fana, fo-fally
Fee-fi-mo-mally
Sally! Daddy!

Daddy, daddy bo-baddy
Banana-fana, fo faddy
Fee-fi-mo-maddy

Rhyming and playing with sounds of letters are necessary to becoming a good reader. Your child is preparing to decode (sound out) words when reading. As you do these things with your child, not only are you helping your child grow emotionally, but you also are helping his language and literacy development.

Tips for Teachers

When your students have faced an unsettling event or disaster, their strength and their ability to cope with the situation rests with the adults with whom they spend the most time—their parents and their teachers. A school day provides students with a structure and routine that is familiar and necessary as they begin to recover from disaster. And yet, teachers need to be flexible and spontaneous when students' fears, concerns, conversations and actions warrant a change in routine and schedule.

Teachers have many literacy avenues they can open up to students as ways to face their fears, overcome their anxieties and have fun. Here are some tips you can use in your classroom with students of a disaster.

Talk…and Listen

Talking with their classmates about the disaster they have faced helps students realize that they are not alone in their feelings—that others feel as they do. Help students share their feelings and reactions by creating a chart with a "Before," "After," and "What I Like" column and ask students to describe changes caused by the disaster, i.e., Before: There was a neighborhood school. After: The school is gone and now we have to go to a different school, further away. What I Like: The new school has a larger playground; I can visit longer with my friends on the bus ride. You also can talk with students about what they miss the most— a pet who is missing, a friend who no longer lives next door, a teacher who was moved to another school— and post the list in a special place in the classroom. Always acknowledge and validate students' feelings and be sure to share your feelings with them as well.

Read Aloud

Read aloud to and with your students. Sharing familiar, favorite books will help students feel safe and comfortable and that things are returning to normal. Have fun with poetry, rhymes and fairy tales. Actively involve students in the reading—What's he going to do now? Why do you think she did that? Take students to the school library to select a book to read for short periods during the day. Ask the school librarian to help you choose some books whose characters find ways to overcome events in their lives. Tell your students a little about the book before you read. Give students a purpose for reading (or listening) by asking them to think about what challenge the characters are facing and how they overcome them. You may want to create a chart with book titles, characters and their methods for meeting challenges. Ask students how they might use these methods in their situation. Add to the list as you read other books. Include non-fiction works about natural events, such as hurricanes, floods, tornados and earthquakes, in your reading as a way to help students understand these occurrences. When you read from a variety of genres, you are demonstrating the importance of reading, not just for school, but in daily life.

Write

A variety of writing assignments can help students cope with their feelings following a disaster while building their writing skills. Talk with them about what they write and ask if they will share their writing with the class. Create a list of vocabulary words and their definitions that have to do with the event—words that students might read in a news article, or hear on the radio or TV. Encourage students to use these words in their writing. Begin by asking students to describe what they saw and heard during the disaster and how it made them feel. Ask them to write a note of encouragement to a classmate, about a favorite activity they haven't

been able to do for a while and about someone they think acted like a hero during the event. After you have several writings from each student, ask them to pick one that they would like to edit and revise to place in a booklet that you will create. While initially, you wanted students to focus on their feelings as they were writing, for this assignment you can encourage them to focus on sentence structure, grammar, punctuation and spelling.

Draw

Take some time for students to express themselves through drawing. Students may be more comfortable sharing their feelings through their artwork than by expressing them verbally. You may want to start by giving them an assignment that is more factual and doesn't have to involve their feelings, i.e., draw what you saw during the disaster. As students begin to feel more comfortable in sharing thoughts and ideas, you can ask them to draw something that shows how they felt during the disaster. Tell students that often colors are used to represent feelings—i.e., red for anger, black for scary, blue for calmness. Ask students to make a picture that expresses their emotion. Let them combine a variety of materials in their creations—pencils, paints, colored paper, magazine pages, and small objects (beads, shells, macaroni) that can be attached. Let them know it is OK if several emotions are shown in their artwork. Ask if they will describe to the class what their picture represents.

Make a Timeline

Timelines are important graphic representations of when and in what order events took place. They are used to show important historical events and can be used to determine the sequence of events in a book or story. Creating a timeline with your students of the disaster school families faced helps put the events in perspective and may help you correct any misunderstandings students have developed. Creating and interpreting data are both important reading and life skills. Ask students what they think should go first on the timeline (if events happened close together, your timeline might have several entries for one day). What is the first thing they remember about what happened? Include information about what happened before, during and after the event. Ask students to help you record important facts, the impact of the disaster on families or your town and what is being done to recover from the event.