

Tips For Teachers

We all want to take steps that will be the most support possible for the students we'll be receiving from the hurricane region. Once we begin the process of welcoming them into the classrooms, we'll have first-hand knowledge of what the challenges are. In the interim, there are some common challenges we might expect:

- Students will have a wide range of reactions, capacity to cope, and ability to concentrate. This will ebb and flow with them for a long time. As the shock of the storm has begun to wear off, they are finding themselves in a new part of the country. It will be a long time before their lives feel stable.
- Their experience has been one of a total loss of control. Choices we can give them and ways we can help them feel empowered will be important in their adjustment.
- Psychological trauma manifests in a variety of ways, but common symptoms include loss of short term memory, loss of ability to concentrate, hyper vigilance, increased sensitivity for the startle response, and a whole host of reactions that interfere with learning. Children need to feel safe before they can learn, and they'll have been so uprooted over the past two weeks that it may be a long time before anything begins to feel routine. Be patient, be supportive, be open in your expectations initially until we see what kinds of classroom interventions are most helpful.
- Another aspect of psychological trauma is that right-brained activities (emotions are primarily housed in the right brain) leave people more vulnerable to flashbacks and disconcerting symptoms than left-brained activities. Some children find relief in doing math and concrete-sequential activities. They also may be far too overwhelmed with feelings of vulnerability to be able to put words to how they feel or how they felt when they were surviving the storm. It will be more empowering and stabilizing for many to help them talk about what people did -- what actions people took -- what things someone did that helped -- than to talk about feelings. It may be months or years before some are stable enough to go back and re-visit the emotions without that making them feel more vulnerable.
- Their experience in the first couple of days will set the tone. Take extra effort early on to help them feel safe and welcome. Many of their parents may want to stay in the classroom with them for a few days. It might be helpful to have some kind of activity that adults and children could do together when the new students first arrive, and that also would give a natural break when parents would be expected to leave (when the activity is over). Another option might be to have those students and parents be together at the school the first day somewhere other than their new classroom and just have time to adjust together. Taking time and extra measures to bring a build a sense of trust on the part of the parents will be very important in the students finding trust as well. Children are very loyal to their parents' beliefs.



- Provide a balance in your classroom or individual discussions with them between helping them talk about what happened (some may need to go over it again and again) and guiding the conversation to a hopeful focus. They don't have a social history long enough to have experienced that terrible things happen, people cope, and most adjust and at some point can find joy in their new daily routines, lives and relationships. They need to put words to their experience, but they also need others to introduce them to the concept that people in general have a capacity to cope and, to varying degrees recover.
- Find out what kinds of classroom activities were routine for them in their school experience and integrate some of their ideas into your daily routine. Let them know that some of their ideas will be great for us to use here with the whole class.
- Assign buddies for each new child to help introduce them to other students and to the school layout and routine. Work with the buddies on ideas for helping them adjust.
- Think of activities that help new children find a sense of belonging. One classroom had children paint one palm and put a hand print on the hallway wall just outside the classroom, and then each child signed their name with a Sharpie pen when the ink had dried. It is a visual reminder every time they walk in the room that they belong. Your school may not want something so permanent, but think of ways to create that same sense of belonging.
- See what kinds of donations from businesses could help get t-shirts for all of the kids in the school that are the school color with the name or logo on it.
- Plan school-wide assemblies that include singing familiar songs and your school song if you have one, or if you don't, see if the music teacher can help create one with the students. Provide opportunities for the new children to see others they know from the shelter who are in their school, and to see that they're coping. Assemblies are one way of doing that. Think of others as well.
- Think of art activities that also have an element that helps kids sense that they belong. Elementary schools could have kids making beaded bracelets that they give to each other. You could give each student one bead that is identical. You could do the "Hands Are Not For Hurting" activities before they're usually scheduled (Violence Prevention month is October, but you could do that now).
- Although children who have been traumatized need our understanding and patience, this is not a time to let go of expectations around behavior and of discipline. The biochemistry of trauma in the brain (the hyper vigilance) actually is anxiety-producing and often children handle that adrenaline production with anger or aggression. Sometimes they are actually fearful of their own anger, and certainly other students are as well. Consistency and discipline remain vital in giving those children an edge to what seems like an out-of-control world. Discipline consistently but with understanding.

We will continue to provide ideas and support as you let us know the needs that manifest.

