

Guidelines for Helping Youth in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina

There are families that have been impacted on many different levels. Some of the following will be premature for those families that are still waiting for safe surroundings. That means that some of this may be applicable for some groups now, and for others not for days or weeks to come. **Nothing else will matter until people have shelter, food, sense of security, clothing and basic human needs met.** Although some of this seems obvious, give consideration to each of these points:

Routine gives us a sense of security. These families have lost all sense of security over the past week. Help families see the value in establishing any routine at all that they can, especially routine that was usual prior to the hurricane. Create a bedtime ritual that takes some time, even for older children. That might include doing tooth brushing and washing up awhile before it is actually bedtime, and then having some kind of family ritual -- talking about gratitude for something or reading together; if the family is one of faith, having prayer time together, maybe talking about one thing they look forward to. Give children as much warning as possible (if you're able to know) when another change is about to happen or when their routine will be interrupted.

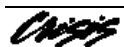
Night terrors, nightmares, flashbacks and other disconcerting re-visiting of the trauma are common. While in shelters, children are able to be close to parents, but as they begin to find housing, children may need to continue sleeping in the same room with parents for some time. Indulge children in ways that help them feel safe enough to sleep.

Help them anticipate triggers. Talk ahead of time about how it is that when you've been through a hurricane, then every time the wind blows hard or the rains come, it is easy to be very frightened that it will happen again. Talk with them about the importance of telling adults when they have fears, and reassure them that you're always willing to listen.

Self-soothing varies from child to child, so try to help children come up with ideas about how they can help themselves feel better when they begin to worry. Children often think they're the only ones worrying about certain things. Provide opportunities for groups of children to talk about things that work for them in order to both give each other ideas and also to validate that "I'm not the only one worrying." It normalizes for them that worry is not unusual.

Resist the impulse to always have an answer. We often feel that we need to have an answer or to take away the pain... to give hope when there is fear. Sometimes this is our own discomfort in seeing children suffer. Often the best answer is to reassure children that you don't know how it will all turn out OK, or how people will adjust, but that you have faith that, together, you'll make life better again, and that you'll "be there" for them for the long haul. Kids need to know that we aren't going to abandon them -- often they need continuing reassurance that you'll be there.

Another helpful strategy to help kids talk is to **give them a full "step" of distance** from the question, making it impersonal to them. As an example of this, instead of asking, "What are your greatest fears?" instead, ask, "What do you think kids your age are most concerned about right now?" or "What do you think teachers could do to help the kids who came here from the hurricane?" By doing this, children can talk about their fears without feeling so vulnerable, because



they are framing it as though they're speaking for others. **And my favorite question for students....** "What do you most wish adults understood about what it is like for you right now?"

Entertainment and diversion are helpful. Are there local people who could put on plays? Give performances? What opportunities can people provide for an evening out or a break or relief of some sort? Even if it is just in the local gym or shelter where families are being housed.

Often emotions are so overwhelming that staying more in the cognitive realm is helpful. As counselors, care-givers and parents, we often think that helping children put words to their emotions is the way to go. But when we think about the emotions that these displaced people have, those emotions defy description. To ask about emotions and feelings often takes people back into again feeling terribly vulnerable. Try asking questions that keep them in a more cognitive place, such as questions about what they did, what anyone can do now that will help, how you can help them plan how to get through the next minute/day/week/transition. The cognitive act of making lists is a left-brain activity. When we help people activate the left brain, they often feel less overwhelmed. When people are first coming out of shock and are at their most vulnerable, staying more cognitive may help them gain more stability. In time, it may then be helpful to go back and re-visit the emotions. For most of them, it is too soon for traditional therapies.

Much can't be put into words so using art with children is effective in many ways. Give some opportunities for children to draw whatever they want, but also help them draw pictures of things for which they are grateful, things that help them cope, things they look forward to, and their vision of what life might look like some day in the future when they again have a home and something that feels like their very own "regular" life.

Be careful about using the word "normal" when referring to the future. When we talk about "regular" life, it would be easy to say "when life is normal." But what we know is that, for many, it will be a new normal, not their picture of what normal used to be. You may find it more accurate and, for those who survived the hurricane, more palatable to use phrases such as "when life is more settled," "usual," or "regular," rather than "normal." At best, these families will find a new normal. For most, "normal" will not exist again as they knew it.

Reassure children and parents that, although they may be unable to feel hope for the future, that you hold hope that they will adjust in ways they can't begin to imagine yet. The human spirit has remarkable resiliency. Sometimes all that gets us through these times is the realization that others have survived horrific times and have gone on to eventually find great joy in their "new normal."

Being able to **connect with loved ones** is the most important and basic need children have. As they begin to move students from shelters into new schools, give them plenty of time to adjust, and let children connect with their parents often during the day if possible.

Most important: **Children will do as well as the adults around them.** It is important for us to stress self-care for adults. If we don't take good care of ourselves, we won't be able to care for the children. Some of the best support you can provide for children is anything that will help their parents and caregivers to adjust or feel better. And this also goes for all who are working in response to this event. Self-care for all of us is crucial, as difficult as that may be.

