

# Teachers' Resource: Helping Students Cope in Times of Crisis

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# Helping Children Cope With Disaster

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**T**here are a few events in our lives that are so momentous that we can remember, with clarity, the exact moments in time when they occurred. National tragedies like the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and John F. Kennedy, the Oklahoma City bombings, and most recently, the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks have such an impact. These events are unsettling and shocking to our sense of comfort and normalcy.

Adults and children alike struggle as we try to make sense of tragic events. We grieve for the security and naiveté we once had, and we question what the future may hold. However, young children do not have the life experience or cognitive development to understand these events or grieve them as adults do (Christian, 1997). Thus, children will not react in the same way that adults do, nor will their reactions be uniform (Cohn, 1987; Corr, Nabe, & Corr, 2000; Rodabough, 1980).

Schools and other educational settings serve many roles in a child's life beyond academic preparation. Grief scholars describe these settings as akin to "a central caregiver" (Silverman, 2000, p. 194) and as being "the hub of a child's life" (Johns, 2000, p. 77). Teachers will need to support children as they try to understand the recent terrorist attacks and learn to express their grief and fears. Trying to understand death can be difficult and confusing for children (Charkow, 1998; Hollow, 2000; Wellhousen & Downey, 1992). They may manifest uncharacteristic behaviors as they seek to understand the "confusing and troublesome feelings that they have no words for" (Mann, 1994, p. 26). Adults can facilitate this grieving process for children (Charkow, 1998; Monroe & Kraus, 1996). Schools and other educational settings can offer support and

connect children and their families to other community resources and professionals (Sheras, 2000).

The literature has noted the value of teachers and school counselors in easing childhood grief (Hawener & Phillips, 1975; Roberts, 1981; Wellhousen & Downey, 1992; Westmoreland, 1996). However, the literature also notes the difficulty that many adults have in discussing death (Westmoreland, 1996). Therefore, it can be assumed that teachers may experience their own difficulty discussing the recent terrorist attacks.

## Case Study

Monday morning, Helen Campbell arrived early to her kindergarten classroom. It had been only two weeks since the terrorist attack. She set her coffee and briefcase on her desk and began to prepare for her students to arrive. The constant news of the terrorist attacks has unsettled Ms. Campbell. Everyone she drove past this morning, the customers at the local coffeehouse, and her fellow school personnel all seemed to be "in a fog" trying to understand and cope with these events. Ms. Campbell wondered how her students were responding. What would they say today? Were they as unsettled as she was? Would things ever get back to normal?

The bell rang, signaling the start of class. Ms. Campbell looked up to see all but one of her students sitting bright-eyed in front of her. The day's activities got off to a slow start, but soon students were working on drawing pictures of fall.

Then, there was a knock at the door. Ms. Campbell turned to see Josh, her missing student, and his mother. Josh was sucking this thumb and clinging to his mother's leg. Ms. Campbell was surprised to see him acting this way. Josh was an active child who previously had seemed to be afraid of nothing. Josh's mother apologized for their lateness. She stated that "Josh just hasn't been the same since the terrorist attacks. He continues to want to watch the news coverage of the disaster. My husband is a firefighter and well. . . . Josh is worried about his Dad. He won't let either of us out of his sight. I just don't know what to say to him. He had been so upset . . . and he has been having nightmares. Last night, he climbed into bed with my husband and me. He hasn't done that for a long time and well . . . now he is acting like a baby. We are worried about him. Would you let me know if you have any suggestions about how we can help him get back to his old self?" Ms. Campbell nodded; Josh's mother explained she had to get to work, and so she hurried out the door before Josh could turn around and notice her departure.

When Josh realized his mother had gone, tears instantly began running down his face. Josh's friend, Peter, yelled, "Ms. Campbell . . . come quick. Josh is crying." Ms. Campbell went to comfort Josh and encouraged the other children to continue working on their drawings. Peter said, "Josh is scared about his Dad, you

## *Children are resilient and most will bounce back, even from extremely traumatic events.*

know . . . if he would get killed. I told him it is OK to cry. I sometimes worry about my dad, too . . . he is a police officer."

Out of the corner of her eye, Ms. Campbell noticed Amy, who was sitting under her desk. As she moved to talk to Amy, Max stopped her and asked, "Why does everyone keep talking about those buildings?" Ms. Campbell said after recess that they would have a special time to talk about the disaster together.

Ms. Campbell walked around the room, commenting on each child's drawing. Many of the drawings represented the World Trade Center on fire or collapses into rubble. Some pictures represented people caring for others. While many children did not talk about the disaster, they did draw pictures, indicating that they were thinking about it.

Ms. Campbell sighed in relief when the school bell rang to signal recess. It was a welcome break for the teachers as well as for the students. The children were excited to be outside so that they could play and run free. As Ms. Campbell walked the playground, she noticed Josh following very closely behind her. She also noted that Amy sat alone against the school building wall. When she approached, Amy said she wanted to be left alone. Many children were playing out the events from the terrorist attacks. Some of the children ran and screamed when a car backfired.

The children pretended to rescue each other and save imaginary victims. Then the bell rang and they all returned to class.

### **What Our Case Illustrates**

Teachers will find that their students' reactions to tragedy will vary widely. The above vignette highlights two children, Josh and Amy, whose reactions are perceptible. For some children, the effects may not be as noticeable. A "care team" of teachers, the school psychologist, school social workers, the principal, and others will need to pool their knowledge of a child—his or her coping ability, support system, and other factors—to assess that child's need for support or counseling. Table 1 serves as an overview of children's common reactions to tragic events, and includes an explanation of these reactions and some recommendations for adult support.

Children are resilient and most will bounce back, even from extremely traumatic events. Typically distressed children, in time, will display less fear, sadness, and distraction and will assume more normal patterns of behavior, refocusing on their schoolwork for example. A few children, however, may exhibit persistent symptoms of sadness and fear, including fear of sleeping alone, and experience nightmares. Their attention may be

**Table 1**  
**Children’s Reactions to Witnessing Tragic Events,  
 and Explanations and Supportive Strategies**

<b>Reactions</b>	<b>Explanations and Supportive Strategies</b>
<i>Anxiety, fear, and worry about safety of self and others</i>	Children are fearful due to upsetting images they see on TV. They don’t differentiate between reruns of old news pictures and current events. Avoid displaying pictures of the disaster in the classroom. Reinforce ideas of safety and security.
<i>Worry about the possibility of a recurrence</i>	While you can’t give total assurance that more bad things won’t happen, you can explain that America is a strong country and that disasters are very rare. Reassure them that the President of the United States and other leaders are in charge to protect them. Provide evidence that adults will protect them. Tell them military personnel are working every day to protect all of us. Remind them that firefighters, police, doctors, and nurses are always on duty to take care of children and adults. Read books about <b>courage, bravery, and perseverance.</b>
<i>Fear of the dark, fear of sleeping alone, and nightmares</i>	Daytime fears can become nighttime fears. It is not uncommon for children who have witnessed terrifying images to have transient fears at night, including bad dreams and bed-wetting. Leaving a light on and the door open often helps. Some children may benefit from sleeping in the same room with parent(s) for a few days. Try to make bed time a happy time.
<i>Fear of going to school</i>	Fear of going to school may actually be a fear of leaving home. Some children may have difficulty with separation anxiety, or a fear of separating from a parent to go to school. Reassure them that they will be together soon. Parents can insert notes in lunch boxes describing activities they will do together after school (e.g., make pudding, finger paint, read the comics, learn a new joke).
<i>Difficulty concentrating, paying attention, and staying on task</i>	Preoccupation with traumatic events interferes with normal concentration. Children who are preoccupied with thoughts and images of the terrorist attacks may have difficulty processing information and staying on task with daily work. Provide frequent review sessions that reinforce previous learning and slow the pace of presenting new material. Give students adequate time to assimilate new information.
<i>Acting-out behavior (i.e., anger, defiance, tantrums, and aggression)</i>	Anger is a common reaction to fear. Feeling angry and acting out those feelings can give children a sense of having control, rather than being helpless. Talking about being mad can reduce the need to direct those feelings at others.
<i>Regression, including such behaviors as whining, clinging, and using baby talk</i>	Regression is a common response to stress. Some children cope with anxiety by regressing to behaviors more characteristic of younger children. Dedicate time to giving undivided attention. Let them see that you are physically available to them. Hold and hug them. Let them see that they can depend on having shared time with you.
<i>Withdrawal and a preference for being alone</i>	Emotional withdrawal can occur as a response to stress. Some children withdraw from others and appear to lack an interest in their usual activities. Encourage the child to participate, praise them when they show efforts to engage in social behaviors.
<i>Evident sadness; crying</i>	Sadness and crying are normal responses to traumatic events. Children know that mothers, fathers, and children were killed during the attack, and they feel sad. Acknowledge that their sadness is real; tell them adults are also sad. Reading stories about grief can help children know that their sad feelings are normal. Stress that the firefighters, police, and other victims will always be loved and remembered. This will reinforce that each person who died is <b>special and will not be forgotten.</b>
<i>Aches and pains</i>	Emotional suffering can be expressed as physical pain. Children may express fears through aches and pains, including headaches and stomachaches. Recommend that parents consult with a pediatrician to be certain the pain is not a symptom of an illness.
<i>Re-creations of the events</i>	Children may reenact traumatic events by repeatedly talking about them and acting them out. Acting out traumatic events serves to give children some sense of control and power over what they are experiencing. Set limits on scary or hurtful reenactments.
<i>Overreactions to sounds</i>	Loud, unexpected sounds can initiate an exaggerated fear response. Increased response to loud noises, including police and fire truck sirens, can result in heightened fear responses. Children may use such words as “jittery” and “jumpy” to describe their state. Reassure them that, in time, these jumpy feelings will go away.
<i>Expressions of dislike toward others</i>	Children may have bad feelings toward Middle Eastern classmates and feel justified in calling them names or harassing them in other ways. Remind them that calling others bad names is hurtful and is wrong.
<i>Gestures of support</i>	Children benefit from feeling that they can do things to ease other people’s suffering. Help them express empathy and compassion by doing concrete activities like making cards, poems, and pictures for survivors. Encourage caring for each other.

scattered, they may be reluctant to go to school, and they might withdraw from contact with others. Occasionally, a child will become aggressive and act out his or her feelings by fighting and bullying. If children display unremitting stress reactions, teachers should confer with parents about referring their children to a counselor or school psychologist for assessment. Guidelines from the National Association of School Psychologists indicate that children's reactions to a stressful event should be diminishing within 30 days. These guidelines, however, do not apply to certain groups of children. For example, children who experienced the death of a loved one will have their lives changed forever. Their grieving and healing process will be more complicated due to the circumstances surrounding their death. Another group of children at risk for prolonged stress are those children whose parents are called to active military duty in dangerous areas.

### **Helping Children in the Aftermath of a Disaster**

Teachers can help young children who have experienced a disaster in important ways, in part because of the day-to-day relationship they have established with the children. Children ages 4 to 6 need adults around who will listen carefully to them. They have a limited vocabulary for describing frightening and confusing feelings; saying "I feel bad" can represent sadness, anger, guilt, grief, fear, or any combination of strange, intense feelings. Children at this stage need to believe that their thoughts and feelings are important and that adults will take the time to listen to them, even if they ask the same

questions several times a day. Remember, the terrorist attacks were not a single traumatic episode with a beginning, middle, and end. Rather, they were parts of a protracted series of traumatic events. Some children have fathers, mothers, or other family members who have been called up to serve in the armed forces, and so they will be fearful for their safety for some time.

Children need permission to talk about their worrisome thoughts, feelings, and images. They need to know that as new questions arise that at least one person will be available with whom they can talk. They need to be offered opportunities to express feelings through drawing and story telling. They need to believe they are not alone, that others feel the same way.

Counter children's fundamental fear of abandonment by reinforcing the fact that they have parents and other adults who love them and will watch over them. Remind them that the President of the United States, his aides, and the military are busy keeping us safe. Remind them that many adults in their communities, including firefighters, police officers, doctors, and nurses, work every day and night to keep children and their families well and safe.

Some children may complain of aches and pains. While these symptoms may be manifestations of stress, they also may represent symptoms that have an organic basis. It is prudent to inform parents of such complaints, so that they can raise the issue with their pediatricians to rule out the possibility of a physical illness.

As a result of exposure to pictures of the disaster, children will have a collection of intrusive memories showing people in danger, crying and frightened.

They can benefit from hearing such short stories as "The Little Engine That Could" or "The Tortoise and the Hare." These classics have enduring messages about conquering difficulties through patience and perseverance.

Children have an amazing capacity for reaching out and helping others in need. Encouraging children to express nurturing feelings toward the victims will help them realize that they have the power to make others feel better. Thinking of others in need also instills in children the belief that if they are ever having a hard time, then others will be there to give them care and comfort.

Children need to be able to anticipate that some parts of their lives will remain normal. They need concrete evidence that some things do not change despite the disaster. Being able to anticipate familiar schedules and routines at school and at home is comforting. They need to believe that order remains in their lives, and that adults are in charge.

Finally, young children need fun in their lives. They need to celebrate birthdays, go to parties, celebrate holidays, sing songs, and play. They need adults to cheer for them and clap for their victories. They need distractions that lift their spirits.

Plan events that create good memories to counterbalance the scary, sad memories associated with the disaster. Such activities could include working on group projects, making up a story with a happy ending, creating a puppet show, planning a party, and making favors for another class. Although children will continue to be coping with stressors related to the disaster, these activities will remind children that good things still happen each day.

## A Child's Conception of Loss

Allison asked her father if she could watch T.V. He said, "No, why don't you draw a picture instead." A short time later, Allison asked him if he would like to hear a story. He said he would. Allison showed him the four pictures she had drawn and told her story:

"This is a little girl crying when she is telling the story."

"This is the plane, you can't see the bad guys inside."

"This is what they did."

"Love and care. This is what America should do."

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# Our Responsibilities Toward Children

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## Keeping Children Safe

In the days after September 11, the newspapers were filled with many accounts of heroism. Firefighters, police officers, emergency medical personnel, and ordinary citizens responded to the tragedy with courage and compassion. Teachers, too, were heroes. I was particularly struck by the accounts of how teachers at the World Trade Center and Pentagon child care centers brought all of their children to safety. An article by Sue Shellenbarger in the September 26 edition of the *Wall Street Journal* describes how 14 teachers calmly evacuated 42 children from the Children's Discovery Center at the World Trade Center. Following their regular fire drill procedure, teachers grabbed emergency records and quickly led all of the children outside. Many of the children were picked up by their parents as they fled the area, yet 28 children remained with the teachers. Some teachers walked over a mile without shoes, carrying babies; others loaded toddlers into shopping carts from a nearby grocery store. When they made it to safety, teachers called parents on borrowed phones and waited until the last child was reunited with his family.

The Children's World Learning Center, located 30 yards

from the Pentagon, had 37 staff and 148 children in attendance at the time of the attack. Teachers loaded the babies into mobile cribs and moved them and the older children to safety, dodging fleeing Pentagon workers. Teachers kept their group together and calmed the children by singing and doing fingerplays. It took over three hours before most of the children were claimed by their parents. Three of the children lost a parent in the attack.

As we acknowledge the heroism of these teachers, it is important to recognize the factors that contributed to their success in bringing all of their charges to safety. As Shellenbarger points out in her article, the teachers were well-trained professionals working in high-quality centers. The centers held regular fire and evacuation drills and had established emergency policies that were strictly followed. Staff-to-child ratios were low.

The teachers and administrators were deeply committed to the children's safety and well-being. Both centers were employer-subsidized. Because of the high level of employer support they enjoyed, the centers were able to provide quality care, which ultimately contributed to the safe evacuation of all of the children.

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## Helping Children Cope

As the news reports confirmed the September 11 attacks and began to provide the terrible details, teachers and administrators at child care centers and schools around the country searched for ways to help children cope with the tragic events. In many elementary and high schools, teachers were the first to break the news to children and strove to reassure them of their own safety. Many child care centers and schools for younger children shielded the children from the news, leaving it to their parents to decide what and how much to tell them.

At our campus Child Development and Family Center in Plymouth, New Hampshire, the children (toddlers through kindergarten) were not told about the events in New York and Washington. Teachers struggled to hide their own anxiety in order to give the children a "normal" day. Some parents arrived early to pick up their children, who were delighted by the unexpected treat. The center director, Karen Sanders, sent the following letter home to every family:

*Dear Center Families,*

*The terrible tragedy that has taken place in our country today is frightening to all of us. As parents of young children, you may not only be struggling to cope with this news yourselves, but also wondering how to answer questions that your children may have. No matter what we do to protect them from hearing about such tragedies, even very young children seem somehow to learn about news like this.*

*In the past, children have asked the Center teachers about incidents that disturbed them. Children have discussed such events as the Gulf War, the Oklahoma City bombing, and the tragedy at Colum-*

*bine High School. When children do bring up their fears, Center staff try to reassure them that we and the people who love them are here to take care of them and keep them safe. We also make sure that they know we are listening and that they can talk to us about their worries.*

*We will be sure to talk with you about any fears or concerns that your child shares with us. I hope that you will help us in trying to collect information and resources about how to help young children deal with these frightening events. Please let us know if you have suggestions.*

*If your family has been personally affected by today's events or if your child seems to be very concerned and disturbed, please speak with your child's teacher. We will do all that we can to support the children and you in this confusing time. Staff from the College Counseling Center will be here tomorrow to support the staff as we reassure those children who have questions and concerns. Please do not hesitate to ask if there are ways that we can better support your family.*

*Often, we have found the children to be very empathetic toward the pain experienced by others, even people who live far away and who they don't know. You may notice that children seem to pick up quickly on newspaper and television items that picture people, especially children, in distress. This empathy for others is a wonderful quality that we try to recognize and appreciate. Encouraging children to empathize with others is one thing we can do to help prevent future tragedies.*

*Sincerely,  
Karen Sanders,  
Director*

The wonderful empathy that children can experience was expressed in a letter that an 11-year-old girl wrote to the *New York Times* two weeks after the tragedy. "I want to say something to the children who lost a parent in the last two atrocious weeks," Melanie Sovern of Queens wrote. "My mother died six years ago, when I was 5, and I know you kids can still have a good life. Your parent loved you and knew that you loved him or her. . . . This is the hardest time, and the worst pain will pass. You can still feel loved."

Melanie Sovern must have received a lot of love and support from the other adults in her life after her mother's death, in order for her to be able to reach out to comfort other bereft children. In the days ahead, it will be our responsibility as caregivers to provide that kind of security and reassurance to the many children whose world changed on September 11.

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# Helping Students Cope With Crisis and Build Resilience: Guidelines for Teachers

**Janice H. Patterson**

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*This article was first published in Focus on Elementary, Winter 2001, Vol. 14, No. 2. Janice Patterson is co-authoring Bouncing Back: Creating Resilient Schools. This article is an outgrowth of that work.*

On September 11, 2001, teachers across America were faced with the challenge of how to deal with the attack on America. For some, the televised events dominated their classrooms, as children's programs were interrupted by reports about the destruction and loss of lives at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. As teachers, parents, and other caregivers struggled with their own emotional responses, at they had to decide how best to handle the events with the children in their charge. The challenge in such situations is to offer children genuine reassurance, ensure their safety (to the extent possible), and help children build their own resilience. Responses to such crises can be divided into three categories:

1) taking charge, 2) creating a climate where children feel safe and loved, and 3) building resilience.

### **Take Charge!**

Ignoring a crisis because you are not sure what to do, or proceeding as if it were business

as usual, simply will not work. Teachers must take charge and move quickly to deal with children's fears. Teachers can help students handle the fear they experience when they hear about, see on television, or directly experience a frightening event. Teachers must not tell the children, "Don't be afraid."

Instead, the teacher must consider ways to help the children feel safe even when bad things are happening. The goal is not to sugarcoat the events, but rather to help the children develop coping strategies that build resilience. The first step is to validate children's feelings or fears by helping them express such feelings through play, art, writing, or conversation. Doing so will build resilience against stressful events.

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## Provide Care and Support

Consider other times when children needed comfort, and what strategies you found to be successful in giving that caring and support. With young children, physical responses such as holding their hands, rocking them, or singing to them may be soothing. Encourage older children to verbalize or write about their fears and discuss them with adults. Not only are such strategies calming, they also demonstrate ways to cope that the children can use in future times of high stress. As educators, we want children to know that they do not have to be overwhelmed by crises, even terrible ones. A basic tenet of building resilience for all people is learning the value of relationships and social support in facing crises. Encourage children to talk about their fears to their peers and to you.

Children who will not or cannot talk about their feelings need alternative forms of expression, such as painting, writing, or creating music. Nearly any strategy that functions as an expressive outlet is a good one. Very often, children who will not talk about their fears will discuss the meaning behind a painting or poem. If you work with special needs children, they may find physical exercise or music to be a good outlet.

## Build Resilience

Teachers can use frightening experiences as a basis to help children develop personal resilience. By reminding children to ask for help when they need it and, if necessary, teaching them how to ask for help, teachers take a step toward promoting children's ability to cope with unexpected, frightening events. It is essential for teachers to validate children's fears during threatening experiences. The trick is to acknowledge the child's fears (and maybe your own) without adding to the child's feelings of instability.

One way to do this is to say something like, "You're probably very frightened by the idea that bad people can cause an airplane to crash and hurt good people. That's a very scary thing. What could we do to help you feel better about it?" By asking such a question, the teacher is acknowledging the horror of the event, and sets the expectation that something can be done to help the children cope with the event. By involving children in finding coping strategies, the teacher is also pro-

moting personal resilience. If the children get stuck, the teacher can remind them of other times when they were upset and ask what helped in those times. If they still cannot respond, the teacher can offer suggestions, such as "What if we try talking about it?" Teacher suggestions can help teach the child new resiliency building strategies.

Encourage children to talk, talk, talk about their feelings, fears, and thoughts concerning events that frighten them. The teacher's job is to listen, listen, listen. Too often, adults want to tell students how they should feel instead of listening to how they really feel. It is also common to want to tell children that everything will be okay or to explain why events occur. Although this is natural, it is not productive in helping children cope.

Other strategies teachers might try include:

- Being flexible in classroom activities and behavior expectations, while providing the stability of a normal routine to reinforce the idea that the children's worlds are not in total chaos
- Staying physically close to children who seem to be having the most difficulty as your presence will be reassuring
- Limiting exposure to television, newspapers, and other evidence of the distressing events
- Teaching the children relaxation techniques like deep breathing or progressive relaxation
- Using art, music, and language as vehicles for expressing fears
- Encouraging physical activity to discharge pent-up anxiety
- Listening or creating to calming music
- Finding ways for children to take concrete action in response to the crisis event.

Teachers also must recognize that some children may react to traumas in extreme ways that will persist, and will therefore require a referral to a mental health professional.

Teachers who help children cope with frightening events in the outside world must be systematic in building their own resilience. Take stock of what helps you confront frightening events and then practice those strategies, whether they are physical, mental, or spiritual. Remember that the primary mark of a resilient person is asking for help when needed. Lean on your network of family and friends through difficult times. Strong, resilient teachers are the best support for frightened students.

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