

## Teacher Guidelines for Helping Students after Community Violence

The recent violence has been a frightening experience and can be stressful. Most staff and students recover over time, especially with the support of relatives, friends, faith, and their community. But staff and students have different experiences during and after the event, including those who may have involvement in police investigation, and who are close to the vicinity. How long it takes to recover will depend on these varying experiences. Over time, most youth and adults will return to normal routines, while others may struggle longer.

There are many reactions that are common after community violence. These generally diminish with time, but knowing about them can help you to be supportive, both of yourself and your students.

### COMMON REACTIONS

- Feelings of anxiety, fear, and worry about safety of self and others
- Fears about another violent event
- Changes in behavior:
  - Increased activity level
  - Decreased concentration and attention
  - Increased irritability
  - Withdrawal
  - Angry outbursts
  - Aggression
- Increased physical complaints (e.g., headaches, stomachaches, aches and pains)
- Changes in school performance
- Repeated talking or thinking about the incident
- Increased sensitivity to sounds (e.g., screaming, sirens)
- Changes in sleep
- Changes in appetite

- Lack of interest in usual activities, including interest in playing with friends
- Increased chance of high-risk behaviors in adolescents (e.g., drinking, substance abuse, self-injurious behaviors)

## HOW CAN I HELP MY STUDENTS

Teachers can play an important role in helping their students' recover. Returning to school in and of itself is important in promoting the welfare of children and their families. The following are suggestions to assist you in your work.

### Talking Care of Yourself:

You have experienced the same stressful event and need to prepare yourself to be able to support your students.

- Communicate with others. Make sure that you, with your group of teachers, schedule ongoing times to talk together in order to give each other support.
- Give yourself a break.
- Make sure you take good physical care of yourself, including eating and sleeping well. It is sometimes difficult to teach when you are undergoing your own course of recovery. Even though you may feel very committed to the students, take special time with your own family members or friends.

### Taking Care of Your Students:

Students who have been through a violent event often have difficulties with concentration, attention, and behavior. Some students may be very quiet and withdrawn, while others may be disruptive and overly active. Many will have difficulties with learning.

- **Modify lesson plans.** They may have to be adapted over the next few weeks to reduce the class's workload, move at a slower pace, and be more enjoyable. Also be sensitive to course material that may be violent in nature as this could cause increased distress in some students.
- **Communicate with students.** Be open to talking with students about their feelings and concerns about the incident. It is important to provide accurate factual information to help clarify misunderstandings and reduce fear. End the discussion with focus on current safety procedures and helpful plans for coping.
- **Know your students' experiences.** It is important to invite students and parents to let you know when a student is affected by some change in his or her personal life so that you can better understand any change in classroom behavior or school performance.
- **Share information with others.** It is important for teachers to speak with one another and other school staff to share information and monitor how students are doing.
- **Provide structure.** Maintain a predictable, structured class schedule with specific rules and consequences to provide support and consistency for your students.
- **Refer distressed students for help.** Teachers should encourage distressed students to meet with the school counselor, social worker, or nurse.
- **Encourage your students.** Teachers should encourage students to get appropriate rest and exercise and to eat a healthy diet.
- **Set limits on anger.** It is especially difficult for teachers to have students acting irritably or being disruptive, which may occur after a violent or distressing event. One way to handle irritable, disruptive, or

aggressive behavior is to be clear about the behavior that is expected and reinforce age-appropriate anger-management and conflict-resolution concepts to ensure a climate of nonviolence.

- **Reduce reminders.** Teachers should reduce their student's exposure to unnecessary reminders of the violent act(s). This includes limiting teacher-to-teacher conversations about the incident. Also, the school may have to modify the practice of emergency drills for students still reactive from this event.
- **Identify sleep problems.** Many students may suffer from lack of restful sleep. Tired students often cannot concentrate or learn well and can be irritable with friends and teachers. If a student is having any of these problems, work with their parents and school health staff to address these issues.
- **Be patient.** Recovery comes in stages over weeks and months. Don't become discouraged because some students take more time than others or have temporary setbacks.
- **Promote prosocial activities.** It is very important to engage adolescents in prosocial activities to help rebuild their school community and social life. Prosocial activities are important to building a sense of community and citizenship. These activities can include bullying prevention, suicide prevention, and peer-to-peer supports.

Further information about children, families, and mass violence can be found at the website of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, [www.NCTSN.org](http://www.NCTSN.org).