

# Following a Disaster For Schools

Teachers, counselors, school nurses and other school staff have a unique opportunity to help children and youth process their emotions following a disaster or death. Group activities help students feel less isolated and they provide opportunities to explore and vent their feelings.

## Things School Staff Can Do

1. Find a way to process your own grief, anxiety and feelings of helplessness. You will be much more effective in helping children if your own thoughts, emotions and body sensations are calmed.
2. If you want professional help, humanitarian trauma therapists from around the world have offered free sessions to Maui residents. You can sign up by going to: [brainspottinghelp.com/maui](https://brainspottinghelp.com/maui)
3. Communicate a consistent “We’re not helpless” message. Provide students with choices to help them feel more empowered, connection opportunities, and jobs that help them feel useful.

The following are general ideas. For more specific ideas, please go to: [brainspottinghelp.com/maui-resources](https://brainspottinghelp.com/maui-resources)

1. Grief Activities
2. Calming Exercises
3. Imagination Activities

For more information about helping children after a disaster or death, please go to: [brainspottinghelp.com/maui-resources](https://brainspottinghelp.com/maui-resources)

1. How Children Express Grief
2. Helping Children after Disaster
3. Helping Children after Death
4. Explaining Death to Young Children
5. Childhood Traumatic Grief

# Young Children

## Normalizing

Talk frequently about normal stress responses after a disaster (see [Disaster Stress](#))

Say things like:

- “Lots of kids feel more afraid at night after something scary has happened. Do any of you feel afraid at night?”
- “Whenever a bad thing happens, there are lots of people who help each other. Who have you seen helping someone else since the fire?”

## Physical Contact

Children need more physical touch following a disaster and family members are often too busy to provide this. Offer games or activities that involve short bursts of appropriate physical contact. Also consider touching them on the shoulders as you walk between them. Many young kids may ask for hugs.

## Exercise

Children usually have extra energy or restlessness after a disaster so exercises that expend a lot of energy are helpful. This could include activities like running, jumping, dancing, swimming, etc..

## Nutrition

Increase the amount of finger foods available for young children. Since children often regress after a disaster (going back to behaviors they previously mastered), being able to eat with their fingers may feel comforting and supportive to them.

## Play Reenactment

Young children tend to reenact trauma again and again as they try to integrate their experiences. This is normal and healthy. They may want to act out what happened, reenact their experience by pretending to be an animal, or direct others to act out their own story. Providing things like emergency response vehicles, dolls of various ages, cultures, and genders, and building toys can be helpful for individual and group play.

## Reading Books

Find stories that talk about feelings or crisis events involving children or animals. Look especially for the books that describe ways of coping with uncomfortable emotions. Have a discussion about the book after it is finished.

## Music/Dance

Play various kinds of music that sound sad, scary, angry or happy. Have the children move their bodies in whatever ways feel right with the different kinds of music.

## Storytelling/Writing

Create individual or group stories about something real that happened, or an imaginary story of an animal experiencing a disaster and what kind of things he/she did to cope with the feelings it created. Include positive things that happened along the way. Kids may want to keep a journal of the disaster and the recovery. Emphasize problem solving, helping each other and healing.

### **Puppets**

Children will often feel shy about telling their own disaster story and resulting emotions, but they will sometimes do it using a puppet. They can work as individuals telling a story, or they can work in groups taking turns creating story lines and assigning classmates various roles in the story. Encourage them to include something hopeful or positive that happened (like all the people who came to help.)

### **Art**

Doing art projects related to their feelings will help children explore feelings that can't be expressed with words. Young children often enjoy sharing their artwork with each other. "Circle time" works well for this. Always end group discussions on a positive note (how much healing is taking place, ways to support each other, etc.).

## **Older Children**

### **Normalize**

- Kids of all ages need to know their crazy thoughts, feelings and body sensations are normal after a disaster. They also need to know that for most people, the stress reactions get better as they express them rather than avoid them.
- Have group discussions or group projects to help normalize reactions.

### **Psychology class**

- Do a hands-on project about stress reactions and PTSI (Post Traumatic Stress Injury) after disasters and display it where other students can see it
- Invite a mental health professional to talk to the class about trauma
- Study about rumors after a disaster and how to best dispel them
- Study about what contributes to more severe reactions after disasters

### **Health/Science**

- Discuss the mind-body connection and common reactions to traumatic stress
- Teach deep listening and invite the students to spend time listening to others in the community about their stressful experiences
- Discuss public health concerns following disasters or invite someone from Public Health or the Fire Department to speak to the class
- Learn about coping skills and have students try a variety of them
- Develop family disaster plans or build disaster kits

### **Drama**

- Have students write and direct short dramas about their own experiences or those of others
- Create dramas about various normal emotions after disasters and how the emotions impact others around them
- Dramatize the way in which the community and outsiders came to help

### **Music**

- Sing or listen to music depicting tragedy, sorrow and healing
- Have students write their own songs reflecting their experiences
- Create a free concert for a particular group or the general public to honor the losses

### **Physical Education**

- Provide strenuous activities when the frustration seems high
- Create a running/swimming/etc event to honor those who died
- Talk about what is happening to their energy levels as the students grieve
- Let the students come up with ways to help the community through sports

### **Language Arts**

- Write about a specific moment in the disaster that stands out to them
- Write a poem about what it feels like inside when one experiences great loss
- Give a speech about:
  - Ways in which you have seen people change since the disaster
  - What it will take to heal from the effects of the fire

### **Social Studies/History**

- Study about the government and private agencies that respond to disasters in our country, what they offer, and how they are funded
- Discuss how governing bodies help or delay healing and rebuilding
- Study aspects (of the students' interest) about a different disaster from the past

### **Math**

- Invite students to brainstorm ways math was/is being used to respond to the disaster or to rebuild the community
- Ask the class to solve some mathematical problems related to the disaster

### **Technical Skills** (welding/woodshop/culinary arts, etc)

- Ask student to brainstorm how they can use their skills to help those in the community who have suffered great loss