

MENTORING YOUTH DEALING WITH DISASTERS AND TRAUMAS TIP SHEET

Prepared by Lennis G. Echterling, Ph.D., Anne Stewart, Ph.D., and Mina Attia, M.S.
James Madison University

Introduction

As a mentor, you provide invaluable guidance and support to children and teens who participate in your Boys and Girls Club activities. Many of these kids enjoy fulfilling lives as they play, learn, and grow in your programs. However, it is heartbreaking to know that some of these young people face traumas, witness violence, and endure disasters. Every day, you can read or see stories in the media about acts of brutality, tragic accidents, and catastrophic events that victimize the young. Nevertheless, these kids also have tremendous potential for resilience. With your support and encouragement, children and teens can survive troubled times to go on to thrive in their lives.

The purpose of this Tip Sheet is to help you carry out the vital role of mentoring youth who have been victimized in their young lives. Traumas and disasters may last only a few minutes, but their physical and psychological impact can be deep and long-lasting without the support of caring adults. In the midst of these abnormal situations, children and teens experience the normal reactions of anguish, suffering, and fears. As a mentor, you can make a difference in promoting their resilience!

After a disaster or trauma, young people may...

- Have a need to talk about it.
Some kids may repeat stories about this event many times. Even shy ones will open up to strangers about what they saw on television or what they experienced themselves. Many will ask questions about why this catastrophe happened and what may be in store for the future.
- Re-enact the experience in their play.
Some kids, especially younger ones, may have a hard time talking about the event. Instead, over and over again, they may use play and drawings to tell a wordless story of their traumatic experience.
- Have nightmares and trouble sleeping.
Young people may be afraid to go to sleep or may frequently wake up frightened from bad dreams.
- Be afraid to be alone.
Some young people may develop fears about being left alone. As a mentor, you may notice that a young person in crisis may cling to you while others run off to join their friends in play.

- Be overwhelmed with worries.

In the wake of a catastrophe, children and teens may pay closer attention to the news. Most will be much more vigilant about possible dangers. They may become apprehensive on everyday trips and in doing typical errands. And, if they perceive any threat or hint of danger, they may immediately believe that another disaster is on the way.

- Be troubled by vivid memories.

Many young people will picture in their minds detailed and powerful scenes of a traumatic event. It's almost as if they have their own internal video that replays their experiences whenever there's a reminder. Children and teens may write poetry or draw pictures that vividly portray their experience.

- Have difficulty sitting still.

Young people may become much more active, have problems paying attention, and be more fidgety. Instead of diagnosing them as "hyperactive" or "learning disabled," we can consider these reactions as signs of their struggles with trauma.

- Have upset feelings or no obvious emotions at all.

Many young people will become much more sensitive. They will be easily upset and angered quickly. Others may seem to become numb or apathetic. They may not show any sadness or anger, but they may not show any joy, either. It's as if they are closing themselves off from any future hurt or threat.

- Have physical problems.

Following a disaster or trauma, some kids suffer from headaches, stomachaches, nausea, and fatigue.

These are just some of the common, temporary reactions that children and teens may have to a disaster or trauma. Keep in mind that these are normal responses to an abnormal event. Fortunately, these young people also possess potential strengths and resources.

As a mentor, there are some simple steps you can take to help youth successfully navigate these difficult times to regain a sense of wellbeing and go on to achieve their life's potential.

You can help children and teens by...

- Highlighting the sense of community at your Boys and Girls Club.

After a disaster or trauma, young people yearn for a place of refuge. The deep and abiding bonds with their friends, mentors, and staff members are enormously valuable in promoting resilience.

- Listening.

It may be painful, but the best thing you can do as a mentor is to bear witness to young people's stories as they talk about their feelings. Younger children may be drawing pictures or acting out the traumatic event in their play. Talking, drawing, and play-acting are healthy and natural ways for youth to work through their reactions.

- Comforting.

Feel free to appropriately comfort young people during this time. They are reaching out to you for security right now, and a little extra affection can go a long way in the healing process.

- Reassuring.

You can also realistically reassure children and teens that they are now safe. Remind them that you and other caring adults are taking precautions to protect them from any possible dangers.

- Teaching.

Tragedies are opportunities for young people to learn the most important lessons of life—what it means to be a contributing member of a caring community. Take advantage of this chance to teach youth these basics.

- Praising.

In troubled times, children and teens often show strengths such as thoughtfulness, courage, and hope. You can point with pride to their acts of generosity, compassion, and determination. Be generous with your praise.

- Playing.

In the aftermath of a disaster or trauma, playing may seem like a frivolous activity. However, recreation is life-affirming and an essential part of the recovery process. It is a true example of the power of play throughout a young person's life.

- Providing a regular routine.

Disasters and traumas can leave chaos and turmoil in their wake. At your Boys and Girls Club, you can quickly establish routines that give structure, meaning, and a new sense of normalcy to young people's lives.

- Being a good example.

Actions speak louder than words. By your actions, you can serve as a positive role model for young people on how to go about resolving crises in a productive way.

- Encouraging children and teens to help.

As a mentor, you can encourage youth to offer help to others who are suffering at the epicenter of a disaster or tragedy. For example, young people can make donations to charitable organizations or send messages of support to the victims.

- Referring deeply troubled youth for professional help.

As a mentor, you can share with parents any extreme reactions, such as panic, behavior problems, and crying spells, that you observe in the children and teens that you serve. Young people, especially those who endure multiple and chronic traumas, can benefit greatly from counseling and therapy. You can encourage parents to talk with their pediatrician, teacher, or school counselor for a recommendation.

Resources for Responding to Disasters and Traumas

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

www.fema.gov

The FEMA website contains up-to-date disaster information and resources for survivors.

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

www.ncatsnet.org/ncats

The website offers a wide variety of training resources for volunteers, such as *Psychological First Aid* and *Skills for Psychological Recovery*.

American Red Cross

www.redcross.org/pubs/dspubs/terrorat.html

This American Red Cross website discusses preparations and steps to take prior, during, and after a terrorist event.

Sesame Workshop

<http://www.sesamestreet.org/toolkits/challenges>

Sesame Street developed the outreach initiative *Little Children, Big Challenges* to provide the skills and strategies young children need to build resilience.