

Natural Disasters: Supporting Students and Staff

Natural disasters can strike with such strength and without warning that people's entire lives change in a nanosecond. We often feel helpless to really support a child whose family has lost everything. There are some things to consider, however, and things we can do that will help.

For the kids, remember that having school continue provides some sense of normalcy in a life that has otherwise been thrown asunder. In every way you can, keep their schedules and school day routine predictable so that they have that rhythm upon which to depend.

Forewarn fire drills, or let the kids who are most upset by the disaster know when the drills will happen. Having any sense of alarm is often over-stimulating to their already-jangled nerves.

Kids have the need to tell the story - over and over and over. A way for that to be done that can be especially helpful is to have them tell the whole story from before it happened until after they knew they were safe. Stay away from focusing on feelings (after all, how it felt to see that their home was demolished only re-traumatizes them without giving them mastery at this early point). Stay cognitive - when did s/he realize something was wrong? What happened next? Who was there?

Who helped? How did they get to safety? Ask those kinds of cognitive questions.

Families often take pictures of the remains of what was (the foundation or whatever is left) and kids sometimes want to carry those pictures around at school. Unless it seems to be upsetting to them, it can be helpful for them to show others the complete loss and have others' empathize. It is part of making it real for some. Allow children to do this.

If you can, have the kids who have lost everything and perhaps some of the others who were impacted by the event in a group. It's helpful for them to compare notes, tell their stories to others who understand, and have a time when they know that these activities are the focus. Try a different focus each group session, perhaps including, "What surprised me most is..." "The people who helped were..." "What I wish others understood is..." "What I learned and how I became stronger are..."

There have been a few cases where standardized testing was delayed for awhile. If your district is in the midst of high-stakes testing, find out whether this is an option.

It could be terrific to invite other kids to bring one thing that they're willing to give those who have lost their belongings as a result of the disaster (one of their own toys, books, whatever) so these kids who have lost so much have things others have given them. You could suggest that, in the case of books, they write a note inside to the child who will receive it.

Depending on the ages of the kids who have been impacted, it can be very rewarding and empowering for students to do things that make a difference - fundraising, etc. If it's possible, do something that feels like action and feels empowering for those who can participate.

Remember that these children will now have a whole series of additional changes, so it isn't just about helping them at the original onslaught, it is remembering that they'll need support for months and perhaps years. Keep checking in with them. Encourage them as a group to do lunch together each week. Keep kids connected to one another and to someone who is their special person at school. Remember, the stability of school will mean a great deal to them and to their recovery.

