



To: Our colleagues throughout Quebec From: The Lester B. Pearson School Board, SSD



## TRAUMA What are traumatic events?

Children are increasingly exposed, whether directly or indirectly, to extremely disturbing events and situations such as disasters, violence or threats of violence, accidents or illness resulting in severe injury or death. **Complex trauma** results from repeated or prolonged exposure to stressful events such as neglect, abuse, domestic upheaval and violence. Traumatic events disrupt children's sense of safety and security and can have a profound impact on their psychological and emotional development. However, reactions can be quite variable depending on age, developmental level, temperament, personality, coping skills and support systems.

## What schools can do

Schools play a significant role in providing children emotional support and guidance when confronted by challenging situations. An effective response is based on how individual students are affected by the event, how they might be reacting and the different types of interventions they might need.

In dealing with trauma, schools strive to provide students with a **safe and secure environment**. Administrators employ a managed approach to diffuse potentially volatile situations, attenuate further negative consequences and give direction to the school community geared towards maintaining and restoring order. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) stresses the importance of maintaining usual routines and returning to "normal" school activities to demonstrate to students that "they are safe and life goes on." (NCTSN, Child trauma toolkit for educators; [http://rems.ed.gov/docs/nctsn\\_childtraumatoolkitforeducators.pdf](http://rems.ed.gov/docs/nctsn_childtraumatoolkitforeducators.pdf))

## Psychological first aid

Evidence based practice indicates that following a traumatic event schools are most effective when a supportive environment is created that focuses on providing basic comfort and care. A prime objective of this intervention is to facilitate and encourage naturally occurring support systems (parents, family, friends, religious affiliations, etc.). This approach is known as **Psychological First Aid (PFA)**. The basic components are:

1. contact and engagement,
2. safety and comfort,
3. stabilization (if necessary),
4. assess current needs & concerns,
5. practical assistance,
6. connection with social supports,
7. information on coping support,
8. linkage with collaborative services

(NCTSN, Psychological First Aid: <http://www.nctsn.org/content/psychological-first-aid>)

**Referral to mental health services**  
In the days, weeks and months following a traumatic event, school personnel should be vigilant for students who display more severe forms of stress, grief or suicide reactions. Referrals should be made to appropriate school and community resources (CLSC, mental health clinics, grief counseling, etc.) for interventions or treatment.

## What teachers can do

- Help students understand that it is normal to feel strange or upset when they have been exposed to a traumatic event.
- Describe the many different emotional, cognitive, physiological and behavioural reactions children experience in these situations.
- Explain that some students may have questions about what exactly happened or struggle to understand why a terrible thing has happened.
- Discuss the different reactions, as some students are sad, angry or even make jokes. It is important to let students know that these are all normal feelings, thoughts or concerns when faced with a traumatic situation.
- Use classroom activities and materials to help children deal with their reactions to the traumatic event. (American Federation of Teachers, Share My Lessons: <http://www.sharemylesson.com/article.aspx?storycode=50007527>)
- Encourage students to discuss their thoughts, feelings and reactions with their parents.
- Provide help to parents by sharing with them your knowledge of how students react to these situations and what parents can do to support their children. (American Academy of Pediatric, Parenting after trauma; <http://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/family-dynamics/adoption-and-foster-care/Pages/Parenting-Foster-Adoptive-Children-After-Trauma.aspx>)

By definition traumatic events are sudden and unexpected situations that disrupt normal functioning and produce intense emotional reactions. However, resources are available that provide guidelines and procedures to prepare schools in advance to ensure that their response is effective.

**RESOURCES**

- NASP, Helping schools deal with trauma  
[http://www.nasonline.org/resources/crisis\\_safety/index.aspx#trauma](http://www.nasonline.org/resources/crisis_safety/index.aspx#trauma)
- NCTSN, Psychological First Aid  
<http://www.nctsn.org/content/psychological-first-aid>
- Guidelines for schools after a suicide  
<http://www.maine.gov/suicide/docs/Guideline.pdf>, <http://www.aqps.info/media/documents/postvention.pdf>
- Massachusetts Advocates of Children  
<http://massadvocates.org/tlpi/>
- Washington State The Heart of Learning and Teaching  
<http://www.k12.wa.us/CompassionateSchools/HeartofLearning.aspx>
- Creating Sanctuary in Schools by Sandra Bloom  
[http://www.sanctuaryweb.com/PDFs\\_new/Bloom%20Sanctuary%20in%20the%20Classroom.pdf](http://www.sanctuaryweb.com/PDFs_new/Bloom%20Sanctuary%20in%20the%20Classroom.pdf)
- Calmer Classrooms: A Guide to Working with Traumatized Children  
[http://www.ccyv.vic.gov.au/childsafetycommissioner/downloads/calmer\\_classrooms.pdf](http://www.ccyv.vic.gov.au/childsafetycommissioner/downloads/calmer_classrooms.pdf)

If you have found this postcard to be helpful and informative, please share it with colleagues. Dissemination of information about mental health is the first step toward promoting better mental health!

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