



Families and Work Institute

THE
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JOHNSON
FOUNDATION

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AVAYA

Salute to Educators

Coping and Contributing in Times of Crisis, Tragedy and Trauma; An Educator's Guide

Life is never as carefree for our children as we'd like it to be. Kids are bound to experience tragedy (an acute loss), trauma (a physical or psychic wound), and crisis (a severe and unwanted disruption in the status quo) well before we think they're ready. Family problems happen. Crimes occur. Breadwinners lose their jobs. And now, the threat of terrorism and war brings unprecedented fears to an age that is expected to be bright with possibility.

For over a decade, the **Families and Work Institute** has been conducting research on the emerging issues necessary to help us cope with an ever-changing world. Especially in this day and age, the Institute recognizes the vital role educators play in helping children understand what's happening to their world and what they can do to feel safe and hopeful in it. That is the purpose of **Salute to Educators**.



★ **Educators watch over their children as best they can.** While we can't eliminate all of life's hazards, we can minimize our kids' exposure to them by keeping a close eye on them when they're young, filtering what they see and hear, and steering them clear of situations they are not yet old enough to comprehend.

★ **Educators help their students learn from difficult experiences.** Every volatile event has the potential to become a growth experience. A

family pet dies, and a child detects something about the healing power of memories and shared loss. A best friend moves away and a child discovers her own power of resiliency. A nation's security is threatened and a teen learns about what he values in his country. In countless ways, difficult situations can be used to make children stronger, more compassionate, and better equipped to handle the world they will one day inherit.



In short, a child's crises can become an *opportunity* when she or he learns how to manage them. Her tragedies become *instructive* when she learns how to interpret them. And his traumas become *empowering* when he learns how to rebound from them.

But our research tells us that this happens best with the creative intervention of parents and educators who stand ready to impart their wisdom and comfort to children. The purpose of this material is to offer guidelines for doing just that.

Divided by age, each section will offer a wide range of tips, including:

- ★ Identifying symptoms of stress in children.
- ★ Anticipating and preparing for incidents of crisis, trauma, or tragedy.
- ★ Creating and modeling a safe classroom environment.
- ★ Expressing your own feelings in a measured and appropriate manner.
- ★ Intervening when crisis, tragedy, or trauma strikes.

Infants to Three-years-old

At this age, children are so wedded to the important adults in their lives, especially their parents, that the best thing adults can do to shield their young ones from crisis or tragedy is to create a warm and loving environment. Keep it as stress-free as possible. Shield infants and young toddlers from divisive arguments, violent television shows, and the aggression of older kids. Comfort them when they cry and be patient with them when they are difficult. In short, give them ample reason to feel *secure, looked after, and loved*.

Pre-Kindergarten to Second grade

This is a pivotal time in our children's lives. They're trying to gain control over their emotions and actions but may not yet have the confidence that they've really "taken charge." They may have a difficult time distinguishing between fantasy and reality. They're becoming more social,

discovering that there's a big world and they're not the center of it. And they're beginning to live a part of their life away from the comforts and familiarity of their home and family. Security and predictability are important and a child who experiences crisis, tragedy, or trauma may exhibit any number of responses.

Symptoms include:

- ★ Bed wetting and other regressive behavior (thumb sucking, a need for a "favorite blanket" or toy).
- ★ Irrational fears (monsters, kidnappers, pirates).
- ★ Unfounded fears (Daddy won't come to pick me up from school; my house is going to burn down).
- ★ Nightmares

Expressive Play to Communicate Feelings

We salute a pre-kindergarten teacher in New York, NY for using block play to help students express their feelings. Basic unit blocks give children the power to create and control their environment. Kids are able to develop their ideas in a concrete form, and use the blocks to help them make sense of their world. For more Salute stories, or to submit your own, visit <http://salute.familiesandwork.org>.

Children's needs include:

- A return to normal, familiar, and predictable routines.
- Hugs and other physical and emotional comfort.
- Assurance that adults are in control of things and will take care of them.
- The ability to express how they are feeling.

Things you can do include:

- Make simple, direct statements of assurance. (“Your parents/your teachers care so much and are taking good care of you.”)
- Repeat these assurances several times.
- Limit their exposure to media; don't let them see images of tragedy or loss.
- Have time in the day for expressing their feelings. Suggest that they tell their favorite stuffed animal how they are feeling or draw a picture.
- If you are a classroom teacher, set aside special times to spend with a child in your class who is experiencing tragedy, trauma, or crisis.
- Impress upon families the need for the child to be picked up on time every day.
- Coordinate your efforts with the parents. Encourage them to emphasize calming and reassuring bedtime rituals with the child.



Third to Fifth grade

Children this age are beginning to understand more abstract ideas (such as conflict and conflict management, death and loss, etc.) and engage in complex thinking. They're beginning to see why bad things sometimes happen and can draw conclusions from this. They're beginning to differentiate between right and wrong, and between fair and unfair. When visited by crisis, tragedy or trauma, they are capable of making a connection between the act itself and the feelings it is inducing in them. Their ability to feel, however, is far more powerful than their ability to deal with those feelings, and this is what educators and caregivers must be on the lookout for.

Helping Kids Understand the News

We salute Hewitt School in New York, NY for providing its students with an educational forum on a current event. While providing a wealth of information, the forum also featured breakout discussion sessions, which gave students an opportunity to ask questions, discuss specific topics they were interested in, and express their feelings.

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Symptoms include:

- ★ Sleep disorder (too much, too little, restless)
- ★ Change in appetite
- ★ Nail biting
- ★ Agitation
- ★ Withdrawal
- ★ Sudden tears
- ★ Inability to concentrate on work
- ★ Aggressive behavior

Children's needs include:

- A safe space in which to discuss the crisis, tragedy, or trauma and the feelings it has generated.
- The ability to ask questions, perhaps repeatedly, and know they will be answered with calm and patience.
- A sense of connectedness to family and friends.

Understanding Cultural Diversity

We salute a Girl Scout troop from Texas. The troop created a way to understand a culture completely different than their own by organizing a summit comparing the life of a 10 to 12 year old girl in Texas to that of a girl in Afghanistan. The troop thought about different ways of life in a manner that they could relate to.

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- Help in putting the event in some kind of realistic perspective. (“Yes, there are car accidents, but we try to prevent them by driving very safely, wearing seat belts, and paying attention to other drivers.”)

Things you can do include:

- Do trust building exercises with the class. (One example: Put students in teams of two and have one blindfolded. The other student leads the blindfolded student to the cafeteria at lunch time. The blindfold is removed. The students exchange roles after lunch and the previously blindfolded student leads the “previously sighted” student back to class.)
- Begin to examine and celebrate differences in children. (Some of us are right handed, some left handed, some of us are tall, some short, some black, some brown, some white...)

- Listen for “hidden” questions. (“Teacher, did you ever have someone in your family die?”)
- Provide factual information if they ask for details of a dramatic event, but make sure you understand their question and provide information that they’re capable of understanding.
- Provide more academic support to the student who has experienced crisis, tragedy, or trauma, and, if appropriate, give him or her more leeway.
- Support students’ efforts to gain control over what they’re going through. Offer stronger-than-normal positive feedback when they exercise behaviors such as courage, self-restraint, patience, cooperation, and courtesy toward others.
- Engage the class in a project helping victims of other losses.

Sixth to Eighth grade

The transition from grade school is a big event and puberty is setting in. Children are beginning to feel some independence from their families and the need for strong connections with their friends. But, they vacillate between feelings of dependence and independence, which makes them more sensitive to reacting strongly to experiences of crisis, tragedy, or trauma.

Expressing Feelings through the Universal Act of Art

We salute Artsonia, an online student museum, for creating a public forum where children from around the world could have their art showcased on the Web. Artsonia encourages teachers to do art projects with their class to submit to the museum. This gives students an opportunity to express feelings they may not otherwise convey. It also allows students to become a part of something meaningful and constructive.

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Exploring Concepts and Sharing Youth's Voice with Community

We salute David Bradford and his reading students in Merritt Island, FL for gaining school-wide participation in creating a book, "Patriots Speak – What Middle School Students Believe About America." The book featured drawings, poems, and other creative works, offering an outlet for students to voice their feelings and thoughts, while strengthening school unity.

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- If the event is a national tragedy, discuss historical precedents and show how the nation coped and contributed.
- In response to the tragedy, encourage hope; emphasize what *good* things are being done by good people.
- Encourage discussion about feelings but don't lecture or moralize; affirm each student's right to his or her own feelings.
- De-emphasize competition; promote team building and cooperation.
- Organize the students to do good works for others.
- Model calm and confident behavior but don't be afraid to tell a student that you, too, may have upset feelings about crisis, tragedy, or trauma.

Symptoms include:

- ★ Appetite and/or sleep disturbance
- ★ Inattention to schoolwork
- ★ Headaches or stomachaches
- ★ Hyper-reaction to the event
- ★ Seeming indifference toward the event
- ★ Drinking and/or smoking

Children's needs include:

- Opportunities to do something useful that directly relates to the event.
- A peaceful classroom and home environment.
- Resumption of normal pre-teen activities.
- Time spent with trusted friends and adults.

Things you can do include:

- Stimulate class discussion about the specific topic. For example, encourage students to come up with one example of a time when they were afraid. Have them talk about what it was they were fearful of, what fear felt like, how they coped with it, and how others helped them to do so. Point out patterns of similarity in the different stories.
- Discuss ways in which young people can look out for and protect one another.

Ninth to Twelfth grade

In the teenage years a child's sense of security is challenged by the anticipation of adulthood and all of its attendant responsibilities. Young people this age feel they're expected to make mature decisions in a grown-up manner, but their ability to reason is still greater than their ability to gain control over their emotions, so while they're capable of understanding more about

Taking Action to Improve Community

We salute the 11th Day Heroes of Madison, NE – high school students who were encouraged to volunteer on the 11th day of every month in the wake of the September 11th tragedy. Sponsored by faculty, students organized a bloodmobile drive, raked leaves at the home of a cancer-stricken teacher, cleaned a local fire hall, picked up trash on streets, and organized a 6-hour CPR marathon to raise money for a new rescue unit. This initiative inspired young people to take an active role improving their community, and instilled in them a sense of power and control.

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“the way the world works,” they aren’t necessarily capable of understanding the feelings that might well up when faced with crisis, tragedy, or trauma.

Symptoms include:

- ★ Drinking and/or smoking
- ★ Truancy or other rebellious behavior
- ★ Neglect to daily hygiene
- ★ Withdrawal, including from long time friends
- ★ Association with less-disciplined people

Children’s needs include:

- Assurance that they are still entitled to their childhood.
- The ability to engage in more “give and take” conversations about the event and their feelings.
- Positive role models to learn from.

Empowering Youth, Developing Problem-Solving, and Communication Skills to Stop Violence

We salute Youth Empowerment Strategies, Inc. of Morristown, NJ for developing and implementing Bias Prevention and Diversity Awareness Training in a racially divided New Jersey high school. The two-day training was a retreat for 30 student leaders who were taught how to help other students, thereby creating a safer, healthier learning environment. This approach is effective in times of crisis because it empowers students by giving them the skills to end violence in a turbulent situation.

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Exploring Concepts of Sameness and Differences

We salute Toquet Hall, a teen coffeehouse in Westport, CT, for hosting a forum on understanding Islam in the aftermath of September 11th. Students and adults from the community attended the night of discussion, which featured speakers who practiced, studied, and taught the Islamic way of life. This type of forum provides an opportunity for attendees to have a “give and take” conversation examining the concepts of sameness and differences, and is a benefit to the community as a whole.

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- Tangible activities that instill a sense of power over their situation.
- Support relationships.

Things you can do include:

- Encourage the class to design a project that benefits a community that has been hit by crisis, tragedy, or trauma.
- Encourage discussion of the emotional impact this event has on each individual.
- Encourage poetry, play writing, and other artistic expressions of emotions.
- Encourage discussion of historical precedence and how people coped and contributed.

