



8605 Allisonville Road, #140
Indianapolis, IN 46250-1552
317-596-2202 i-cart.org

After the Tornado: What the School Can Do

The tornados that occurred in many parts of Indiana during the summer became a traumatic event for many individuals, families and communities. Although most of the tornados occurred in mid summer, educators share the responsibility to help students of all ages to understand the events that occurred and their reactions to it when they return to school. It is also important to remember that changes in a child's behavior due to a traumatic event might not be expressed until months after the event.

Children of all ages react differently to the trauma of a natural disaster and the family and community stress that occurs in the aftermath. Some will seem to come through it unaffected. Children who were not directly impacted by the tornado may experience some of the same reactions as those who were. There may be immediate reactions, delayed reactions, both or no reactions. Others will react strongly from the start even if they have suffered little loss or injury. Most children, like adults, have normal and typical reactions to abnormal circumstances that accompany a natural disaster like a tornado in their community. Children generally experience more anxiety than their parents or teachers are aware of. They may become easily upset or hide their distress from parents, teachers and other adults.

Common Reactions:

1. A need to talk about the tornado and their experiences.
2. A need to ask the same question and/or hear the same answer over and over again.
3. Increased physical complaints...headaches, stomachaches, etc.
4. Behavioral changes (difficulty paying attention and remembering things and/or a lack of concentration or focusing; irritability; vivid memories that intrude during the day; anger; anxiety; withdrawal or isolation; sadness; acting out; attention seeking; increased dependency, etc.).
5. Children and adolescents often regress to behavior from an earlier time period (clinging to adults, wanting to be in the same room with an adult, toileting accidents, thumb sucking, crying easily, tantrums, challenging adult authority, etc.).
6. Academic performance suffers (falling grades, disruptiveness in class, rudeness toward adults, falling asleep in class, attendance problems). This may occur in the fall or even months after the tornados of this summer.
7. Sadness and longing for the "way things use to be".
8. Dreams and nightmares are more common, especially about the tornado and its aftermath. The child may want to talk about these at school. If the child experiences sleep difficulties that will impact his/her

performance in the classroom.

9. Adolescents may lose some of their sense of invulnerability. Especially for adolescents, watch for risk taking behavior, changes in peer groups, changes appearance, loss of interest in activities previously enjoyed, substance abuse, hostility and/or increased challenging of adults.

10. Children may show insight and an increasing concern for others.

The intensity of a child's reactions depends on a variety of factors: the amount of loss experienced, threat of life, the family reactions to the tornado and the aftermath of the tornado, financial changes and stress in the home, stress or a troubled home before the disaster, the support system that the child has available, previous losses and previous coping mechanisms. Any marked change in behavior, whether immediate or even months afterwards, often suggests a strong need for mental health consultation or other in-school interventions. Extreme behaviors also signal a need for intervention (destructive acts toward people, animals or property, frequent panic attacks, an inability or unwillingness to socialize that lasts for several weeks or longer and significantly impacts the child's daily activities, etc). Do not hesitate to reach out to parents if you have a concern. Remember that seeking assistance is a strength not a weakness and it can help prevent a concern from becoming even a larger concern.

Tips for Educators:

1. Provide repeated opportunities for children to talk. As school begins give them an opportunity to tell their stories. Children may need to repeat the stories of their experiences many times...they need to talk about what they saw, heard, felt and did during the tornado and after the tornado. They need to talk about what their biggest fear or concern is now. Also use it as an opportunity to talk about what they learned about their community and how people help each other. Make sure the child knows you are listening to him/her. Let young children draw pictures. Older children may want to journal.
2. Control rumors and correct any myths that children may have regarding the tornado and reactions to it. People can respond just as strongly to a rumor or myth as an actual event.
3. Reassure children that many of their reactions are common reactions and that everyone reacts differently.
4. Maintaining a normal classroom routine is very reassuring for students.
5. Incorporate healing activities into the classroom. Talk about how the disaster has changed their personal history and the history of their community. This will help them realize that they are not alone in their loss or reactions.
6. Be aware that storms may bring fears. Children may also now react more strongly to other stressful events in their lives than usually anticipated.
7. Young children often express fear and anger through drawings or play. Acknowledge their feelings as ok.
8. Be aware of changes in behavior. If you are concerned about a particular student check with his/her teachers from previous years to determine what was usual behavior. Reach out to the child and the family.
9. Help to monitor the behaviors of your fellow professionals and yourself. Ask friends or colleagues at work to help monitor your behavior. Reactions to the trauma of a natural disaster impacts adults as well as children.