

DEFUSING FOR HURRICANE KATRINA EVACUEE STUDENTS
(Elementary Students)

Written by Marie Nelson, MEd, Tyler, Texas ISD

(It is best to give the evacuee students 4-5 days to get adjusted to their new schools before doing the defusing. The group should be small enough to have time to listen to each child's story about their drawing.)

INTRODUCTION

Hello, our names are _____ and _____. We are here because of what has happened due to Hurricane Katrina. When these kinds of things happen to us and people we know, all kinds of new feelings and thoughts can also happen inside us which never happened before. Maybe we have bad dreams or feel sad. Maybe we feel mad or afraid, or we just don't want to think about what happened. You probably have questions about what happened, too.

We have met with other children who have had bad things happen to them. They talked with us about what happened, drew pictures and helped us understand how things like this make them think. They felt much better and not so scared afterwards.

We are very interested in knowing what this has been like for you, so you can help us help other children who might someday go through a similar experience.

We are going to start by asking you some questions but first we need to ask you to follow these simple rules:

When you want to say something or ask something, raise your hand just like you do for your teacher.

When one of you is talking, all of us will listen. No one else will start talking or interrupt.

It is okay in here to be sad, to cry, to be afraid, and to talk about what happened because talking will help all of us feel better. It is not okay to make fun of anyone who is sad, scared, or cries. Even _____ and I are sad about what happened, etc.

GENERALIZATION

What happened was what we call a catastrophic event. It happened to so many people over a large area of the United States and so many people need help that it is different in some ways from anything we have experienced before. However, there are some people

who have at least experienced losing their homes through flood, fire, or earthquake. There are also the children in Sri Lanka who experienced the effects of the tsunami last December. They lost family members and their homes. You are not alone.

What happened was very scary. Sometimes when scary things happen people get hurt really bad. Sometimes scary things aren't so scary the next day, but sometimes we stay scared for awhile. Other than what happened with Hurricane Katrina, what is the scariest thing that ever happened to you or to someone you know?

SPECIFICATION

Now let's talk about Hurricane Katrina. What have you been told happened?

(Get their responses. There is no need to correct misperceptions or false information at this time. It will impede the process of externalization of their fantasies, fears, etc. Correction of misinformation and fantasies can be done during summarization.)

The Phrasing of Questions

Factual

When this happened, what did you see?

When this happened, what did you hear?

What did you do?

What do you think about what happened?

Personal

What scares you the most about what happened?

What is the hardest (worst) part of what happened?

How many of you have had bad, scary dreams since this happened?

During the day, how many of you see pictures of what happened in your mind?

During the day, how many of you think about the things that happened?

What worries you the most?

(You want to provide each child the opportunity to participate actively. Remember this is not group treatment but simply an opportunity for them to communicate to us how they have been impacted by the trauma and for us to teach them that what they are experiencing is quite normal given their experience.)

(You may want to return for a follow-up session with the group 4 – 6 weeks after when additional issues can be addressed and you can better evaluate those children who are still struggling beyond the acute stress stage and in need of individual attention and/or trauma specific group intervention. Move to the next stage.)

EXTERNALIZATION

(At this point you will be asking them to draw.)

Drawing:

is a psychomotor activity that takes a person from the passive stance of a victim to the stance of a survivor

provides a safe, non-threatening vehicle of communication to tell of the details of the trauma

provides a sense of control and empowerment as drawings can be changed, erased, thrown away, etc.

provides a stimulus for story telling.)

Instructions

I want you to draw a picture of what happened that you can then tell us a story about. You can draw whatever you like.

(Follow this by giving each child an opportunity to tell the story about their drawing. If they have trouble telling their story, ask questions about the components of their drawing: each person in it, inanimate objects, what is happening, where they are in their drawing, what they are doing, etc.)

SUMMARY

When something like this happens our feelings get all mixed up. You may not feel like eating or sleeping. You may feel worried or scared. You might even feel so angry that you wish you could punch someone. All of these feelings are normal.

We mentioned that you might feel worried or scared. This is normal, but if you do, who is someone you can talk with? (Help them remember that they can talk with their parents, teachers, counselors, etc.)

As time goes by, many of you will begin to feel better. It is kind of like when it rains. When it rains it doesn't rain forever, does it? NO. Worries don't last forever either. Some worries seem like there is nothing we can do to change them or stop them. But we can't do anything to stop the rain either, but it stops, doesn't it? YES, and when it rains, don't we usually find something to do until it stops? SURE WE DO.

It's okay to find things that make you feel a little bit better. It may be drawing, playing a game, playing on the computer, reading or any number of things that you might enjoy doing. It is all right to laugh, play and have fun.

Does anyone have any questions before we end?

(Adapted from Trauma Debriefing for Schools and Agencies written by William Steele, Psy.D., available through the National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children, www.tlcinst.org.)

<http://www.tlcinstitute.org>

This information is made available courtesy of The National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children (TLC), a non-profit 501(c)3 program of Children's Home of Detroit (CHD). If you have questions that you would like to ask our TLC Certified Trauma Specialist on staff, or would like a recommendation for a TLC Certified Trauma Specialist in your area, please call TLC toll-free at 877-306-5256 or email us at steele@tlcinst.org