

## When Hurricane-Displaced Children Go To School

Children's needs will be more obvious as time unfolds, but some general guidelines might be helpful to consider, either for schools set up to take in displaced children, or schools that will be integrating children from a shelter into an existing school.

Obviously, learning will take a back seat to **emotional and social adjustment** for students who have been through the evacuation. Here are some thoughts to consider:

**Both students and parents may need you to be agents of social service as much schools initially.** Even though there are many other agencies involved, there may still be ways that you will provide social service and mental health support, at least indirectly, for some time.

**Children and youth take their cues from us.** Speak in hopeful terms. Bring it up so they know that you're willing for them to talk about it. Ask them what will help them feel good about being in your classroom.

**Children will not be ready to separate from parents** in many cases. Consider having the first day back at school be a day when parents can stay in the classroom, at least for awhile, and have activities ready for them to help parents feel confident about leaving their children and to help children feel comfortable being separated from their parents.

**Activities** that might be most helpful could be those that give parents and children something tangible to hold onto. You could have kids and parents beading bracelets that they could give each other to wear, make worry dolls (explanation later in this flyer). Jimmy and Savannah Buffet have a children's book out about worry dolls (sorry not to have the title). Having something that Mom made that a child can wear all day or keep in a pocket can give them a tangible reminder that they've survived and are not alone.

**Activities that help parents and children affirm their social network** are also helpful. The difficult part of this is that there will be children who will have survived who don't have family members. Do not do these activities in groups that have children who escaped alone and have no surviving family. See attached activities.

**Parents may not be able to bring themselves to leave the school.** Be prepared to provide a room for parents who may want to just stay at the school, feeling unable to separate further from their children, at least for the first couple of days. Provide something to drink and, if possible, perhaps nibble foods for them and "stage" it as an opportunity that you're providing for parents to be able to talk together about how it is for them to have their children in school. Make this more like a planned parent gathering. In New York after 9/11, some schools had a "parent coffee" in the cafeteria that began as school started, so parents could bring their children to school and then gather together to talk about what was troubling them.



**If possible, have a few adults from the school** in the parent room. Be prepared to try to help guide the conversation of the parents to a positive place. Help them move toward a sense of trust in the school while validating their fears, heartbreak and angst. If you have some particularly strong and grounded parents that you could hand pick from your school, you might ask them to be available to just be emotional support for the "new" parents for the first few mornings.

**Have "local" students be buddies for incoming displaced children** to help them adjust to the new surroundings.

**Create visuals that help kids connect to the school**, especially if the students will be with you for awhile, such as having each child paint one palm and put a handprint on the wall of the hallway just outside their classroom. This is a reminder every time they walk toward their classrooms that they "belong" to you.

**Consider having t-shirts made** with the school logo for each of the students. Ask local businesses to donate to this and other projects you can see will help children adjust. Tangible items that include identity of the school can be helpful.

Give them **opportunities to process** what happened and then help them identify things they realize helped them get through that time. Some may have to tell their stories repeatedly.

**Let parents be with children for the first day or two that children get back to school.** They will be in a new place and everything will be different for them. If it feels like it will work, consider having some activities for parents and children to do together until they feel more secure about separating. There are times, though, when the parents are so overwrought that their emotional state will affect the school climate too much to do so. You'll need to make a judgment call here.

**Anything that can bring a sense of empowerment is helpful.** Children adjust better when they can help in some way. It is fine to plan on having students help set up the classroom rather than thinking that everything has to be perfectly in place when they arrive. Doing something constructive brings a sense of empowerment that has been stripped away.

**Entertainment and diversion** can be helpful. Are there local people who can come in to lead games? When the teenagers are ready, can someone have a dance for them? Are there fun videos or anything that can provide a minute of laughter or light heartedness? Are there students from other schools who can do performances?

**Some students may need to re-tell their story repeatedly** while others need a break from the re-experiencing. Try to provide listeners who can just let the students who need to talk about the hurricane have a compassionate listening ear.

**As much as possible, provide support people who reflect the cultural make-up** of those families you are serving. We process loss best with others who are most like ourselves.

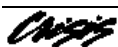


## Thoughts About Leading Discussions About the Hurricane

- You might open with a "**statement of observation**" such as, "Nobody ever could have guessed or predicted that something so overwhelming could have happened. What you went through is more than anyone who wasn't with you can even imagine." A statement of observation is nearly always a safe opener.
- Continue with some **statements of assumption**. "When things like this happen, we have all kinds of reactions. We have fear, sadness, anger... what are some of the other kinds of reactions that people have?" This gives children and youth an opportunity to voice what they did, saw or felt without making it personal. It also normalizes that there are a range of reactions. Too, it does not ask children to label emotions. Some of them will, but for those for whom that would be overwhelming, it allows them to put words to it without having to "own" it. Notice that we aren't asking for feelings, but reactions. The concept of reactions includes actions -- what people did, not just what they felt. Notice that we aren't asking what reactions THEY have, but keeping it impersonal by asking what kinds of reactions PEOPLE have.
- Go on by suggesting **expected symptoms**. "When things like this happen, sometimes we have trouble sleeping. What kinds of things happen to our sleep when we're anxious?"
- Help students identify the ways they realize that **people cope**. Have them give examples they saw or heard of, and then brainstorm other ideas to add to the list. As the discussion leader, add your suggestions last. Children benefit more from those ideas that they generate than from those we provide. That sense of discovery and ownership gives the idea greater validation for the child.
- **Normalize reactions** and give hope. "It isn't unusual for people to have these kinds of reactions, and to have trouble sleeping. Sometimes it is difficult to believe right away, but people adjust. People have lived through all kinds of scary times, and by hanging together with others that survived, and with people who can help, our lives can begin to get better over time." Give examples of times you know people survived and adjusted to major events. For older children, have them give examples.

If you are leading this discussion with your classroom and you weren't directly impacted by the event, all of the above questions can be re-framed as "What would you imagine people went through?" and "What would we imagine their reactions to have been? This is truly a teachable moment for all of our children.

Children have a tremendous need for support, nurturing, routine, some sense of control and predictability. They also have a remarkable ability to adapt and cope. One thing that may be helpful for us as adults is to remember to believe in their ability to cope and adapt, realizing that our support in the short term is what will allow them to do so. Create your own care package for when you get home tired, exhausted, drained, overwhelmed and frustrated. You can only help children to the degree that you are in the best shape possible!



## Activities

**Draw anything you like.** Letting a child draw at will can give you a reading on their adjustment. Some children will avoid drawing about the terrifying parts because they aren't feeling safe enough yet to look back at the trauma of that event. Others will draw every picture about it. Initially, that's fine. Just inviting children to tell you about their picture will be opportunity enough for most to put words to what might be bothering them, but there is great therapeutic value in just doing the drawing. Discussion adds benefit.

**Amorphous Body:** There are lines at the top of the page, and a body as the picture. First lead a discussion with, "Sometimes in life, frightening things happen. When frightening things happen, what are some of the kinds of feelings that kids have?" Notice, we're not asking them to describe how **they** felt during the hurricane -- we're not being that specific -- but asking what kinds of feelings kids have when frightening things happen. Make the longest list you can on the board. Then invite children to write those words on the board that also represent feelings that they have had. Next, invite them to draw in the body where it is that they hold each of those feelings. Suggest that each feeling might have a special color that feels like the right color to represent that feeling. Some will draw sadness in the heart, others might draw anger in their hands and feet... there is no "right" way to do this. This is a great pre- and post-test. Have them do the same exercise a couple of months down the road and compare the amount of sadness the child draws this month and then in a few months. Remember, working on feelings may not be advisable until kids are fairly stabilized. Use judgment on when your group is ready for this. (Worksheet follows.)

**Rocks:** In life, we all have many challenges. This is a field of rocks. Describe the rocks as the challenges of life. Sometimes our path takes us right smack into one, and sometimes we're able to see ourselves around them instead of hitting straight into them. This handout allows children to draw their own journey through life's challenges. They can write on the rocks what their challenges are if they like. Its a great springboard to discussion about resiliency and helping them identify their strengths. (Worksheet follows.)

**A Mask of Fear:** This is a great one for older kids -- either to draw a mask of fear, or a mask of death, or a mask representing some aspect of their reactions to the hurricane. If you have the luxury of an art teacher in your building, you might see whether students could do masks with clay and paint or glaze them.

**Something I look forward to...** It is important for everyone to focus on some aspect of the future that provides some level of hope.

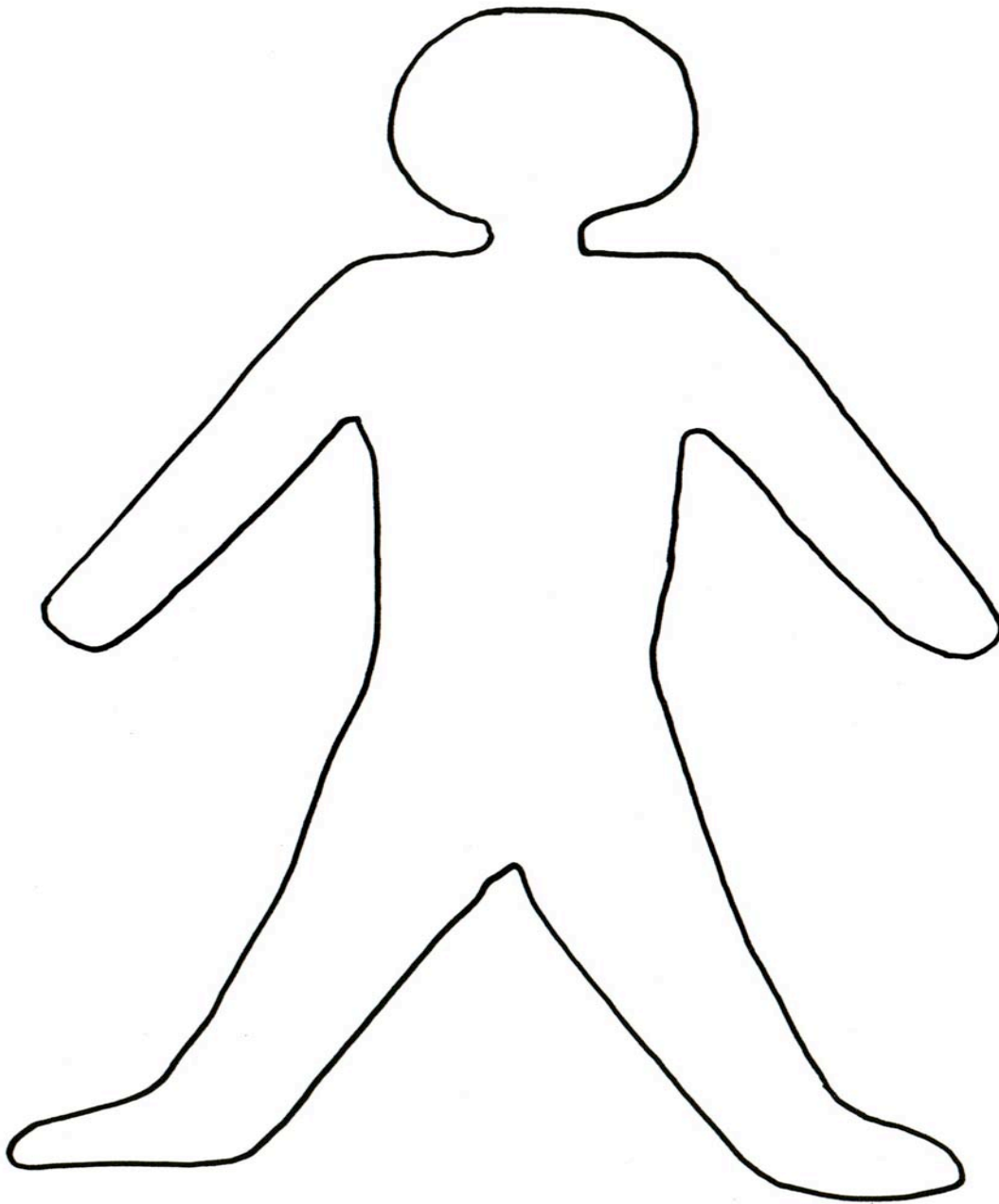
**Worry Dolls:** Children in islands and countries of the Caribbean have, for generations, loved "worry dolls" -- little tiny dolls that they tell their worries to, and then place under their pillows. The worry dolls then handle worry for the child and help create solutions to problems while children sleep. You could make worry dolls together and then let kids decorate a "home" (such as a match box that the doll fits in) so they have a place to keep the worry doll when they're not sleeping. (Example follows.)

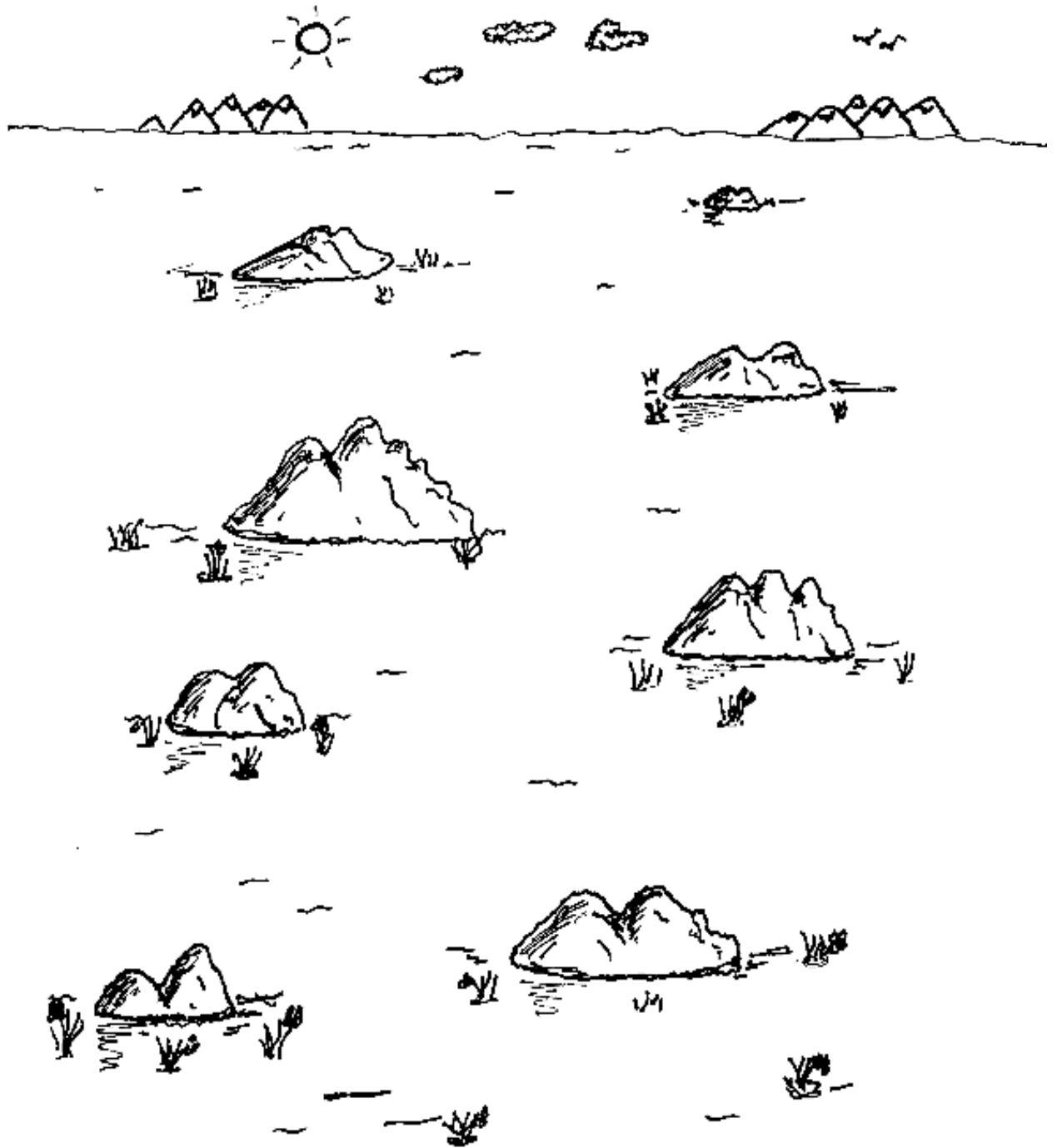


Here are the kinds of feelings I get when these things happen

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This is an illustration of a pipe cleaner Worry Doll. Giving children yarn for hair and decoration, beads and other materials allows them to become very creative in "dressing" the doll and creating jewelry and other personalizing of the doll. It is a nice addition to have little matchboxes that kids can decorate for the doll to "live in" or create other ways for it to have a "home" when it isn't under the child's pillow. The actual size of these is quite small -- the longer piece of pipe cleaner (for the head, body and legs) is 4 inches, and the arms are 1 1/2 inches.. You can use the pointed end of a pen or pencil when bending the long piece in half to create the shape of the head, then twist for neck, insert arms, twist for body and leave the ends for legs.

