



## Memorials/Activities/Rituals Following Traumatic Events

### Suggestions for Schools

#### National Association of School Psychologists

School memorials, ceremonies or memory activities following a traumatic experience serve an important function in the healing process for both students and staff. Such activities provide the opportunity to express emotions through a variety of ways besides talking. In addition, a school memorial helps to bring closure to a period of grieving and serves as a point from which to move on with regular school activities. Memorial activities can take many forms, from tree planting or writing letters and cards, to more traditional “services.” It is best to plan a variety of activities rather than only one “big” event; some students will be more comfortable, and more comforted by, one activity versus another. Providing a range of opportunities to express feelings is essential.

Memorial activities following a large-scale traumatic event such as the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995 or the terrorist attacks of September 2001 have a somewhat different focus compared to memorials following a student or staff death or even multiple deaths following a school shooting or natural disaster. “Closure” may be difficult to achieve, even after several weeks, due to ongoing fear that the situation may recur or that traumatic events, such as war, may take place. In such situations, a significant purpose of a memorial activity is to bring people together in order to express feelings and concerns together—to reduce feelings of isolation and vulnerability. A further purpose is to encourage everyone to think about ways—even very small steps—that can be taken to increase feelings of security and reduce conflicts that can lead to violence at all levels.

#### Guidelines for Planning School Memorial Activities

Participation in memorial activities is important even when students or school personnel do not know any of the victims or their families. The following are key points for schools to consider:

- Proceed slowly and involve students, staff, families, and the community in your planning and decision-making. Remember, the planning and construction of the memorial in Oklahoma City for the victims of the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building took five years.
- Schools should form a committee that includes administrators, teachers, parents and students to plan memorial activities. It is very important to involve students in the planning process including those who had personal ties to the victims if possible.
- Memorial events can be planned as a series of activities, not just the more traditional permanent marker or structure in memory of those who died. Schools can hold group “services” as well as involve classrooms in creating their own tributes, artwork, cards, letters, etc.
- Memorial activities—at least the initial activity—should take place within one week of the event if possible.
- Demonstrate acknowledgement of and sensitivity toward issues of diversity including culturally specific rituals, traditions, beliefs, activities, and practices.

## **Suggested Memorial Activities**

- A temporary memorial site can be established. Flowers, notes, poems, ribbons, stuffed animals, pictures and other objects can be brought by students and staff to a designated location at school to pay tribute to those who died and those who helped to rescue and support survivors. School and community input should be obtained to determine if a more permanent place for these objects is feasible or to otherwise determine an appropriate, sensitive way to dismantle the memorial site. The location of permanent memorials at school should be considered very carefully and locations other than main entrances are recommended.
- Schools and communities who have experienced significant traumas often look for what is termed as “the gift of hope”; i.e., activities and projects that will make a difference and prevent similar tragedies in the future. Following violent events, activities and curriculum that address tolerance and bullying would be appropriate “gifts.”
- Writing activities can be particularly helpful for students of all ages. Students can write and send cards, letters and posters to the families of the victims (in care of a support organization such as the Red Cross) or to those involved in rescue work (police and fire personnel). Older students might also write to local, state or national leaders.
- Be sure to involve all students, including those with disabilities. Activities can be tailored to the cognitive and emotional development levels of all students. Special education staff can be helpful in assuring that all students feel included and that activities are appropriate for them.

## **Developmental Considerations**

Memorial activities should be planned to be appropriate to the developmental level of students involved.

- Young children need to do something to express their grief, even though they may not really understand all that has happened. Drawings—to hang up in the school hallway, to send to the firemen and policemen who helped victims, to send to school children in disaster areas—are an excellent way for young children to express and share their feelings. They can also perform songs or reading of poems as part of a school-wide memorial service.
- Adolescents need activities that provide them with a sense of contribution to the school’s and community’s efforts, not only in recognition of the event and honoring the victims, but in preventing such tragedies in the future. Involve middle school and high school students in all aspects of planning memorial activities, including performing as well as helping with setting up and cleaning up; gather their suggestions for prevention of such events—such as ideas about improving security (locally or more globally) and increasing tolerance and peaceful conflict resolution. Students might be encouraged to write members of Congress or appropriate agencies with their suggestions. In response to terrorism or war-related events, older students might also benefit from studying the political and religious issues that might help explain the origins of hatred and fanaticism.

## **Specific Guidelines for School Memorial Services**

- Involve students of all ages in planning the service.
- Keep the memorial service brief and appropriate to the age of the students. For elementary students, 15-20 minutes is appropriate; for older students, up to an hour.
- Include music and student performances. Playing soothing music as people enter and leave the service will help set and maintain a calm mood.

- Preview the service with students, parents and staff ahead of time. Teachers should help students anticipate how this will be different from typical school assemblies, and should discuss appropriate behavior.
- Have several brief speakers. Select individuals who are well known to students and who represent security and safety—people who students can recognize as able to provide reassurances and support (mayor, superintendent, local police chief or school liaison officer, etc.)
- Invite family members to attend.
- For memorial services/programs, all staff and students should attend (unless parents specifically object). Such programs can be very powerful in uniting the school community, and send the message that each individual is important. If some students choose to not attend, provide a quiet activity as an alternative.
- Involve classrooms by inviting them to bring and hang a class banner or poster to honor the victims or promote peace.
- Use symbols of life and hope in memorial activities. Balloons and candles can be used very effectively to promote a positive, uplifting message that acknowledges pain and sadness yet also is hopeful for the future.
- Following a school-wide memorial service, students should return to their classrooms for at least a short time prior to dismissal. This allows time to talk with each other, their teacher or a mental health staff member (if available) to “debrief” the experience.
- Provide a forum that allows the inclusion of diverse traditions and rituals that are specific to members of the community.

### **Follow-Up Activities**

Particularly following events that will have no real closure for an extended time (i.e., because recovery efforts will be slow, because identification of the perpetrators may not be resolved quickly, because the impact of the event has long-term consequences, etc.), it is important for schools to consider an activity to address ongoing concerns. Schools might consider:

- Linking with other community efforts (such as food drives or other donation activities to children and families displaced by the attacks)
- Establishing and implementing conflict resolution, tolerance and other instructional programs that have long-term prevention goals
- Building a permanent memorial or establishing an ongoing memorial “fund” for disaster relief for current and future tragedies.

For further information on promoting tolerance among children and youth, contact NASP at (301) 657-0270 or visit NASP’s website at [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)

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