

WHEN TO REFER A CHILD TO MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS: PRESCHOOL AND ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

There is a wide range of normal reactions following a disaster. Usually, these reactions can be handled by support at home and at school. However, this is not always the case. As teachers you may need to recommend professional intervention to some parents. In making such a referral, it is important to stress that it is not a sign of failure if parents find that they are not able to help their child by themselves. It is also important to note that early intervention will help the child return to normal and avoid more severe problems later. Young children are the ones most likely to act out the tensions within the family. Family participation in the consultation or treatment is always desirable.

Consider referring the family for professional help if the child:

- Seems excessively withdrawn and depressed; does not respond to special attention or attempts to draw him/her out;
- Engages in overly self-destructive behavior such as holding his/her breath, head-banging, eating inedible objects or substances, intentionally injuring self or having repeated "accidents" that result in injury;
- Continues to have physical complaints (such as diarrhea or constipation) after clearance by pediatrician;
- Acts out in an excessively aggressive manner that poses a danger to children or adults around him/her.

If any of the symptoms described in the next section (Emotional and Behavioral Reactions of Children to Disasters), persist 2 to 4 weeks after the disaster, special attention may be required. It is important to watch for significant changes in the child's temperament or personality. A normally excitable child who becomes docile and quiet, or a quiet, obedient child who becomes aggressive and belligerent, may be demonstrating an inability to cope with stress.

Children who have lost family members or friends and children who were physically injured, or felt that they were in life-threatening danger, are at special risk. Children who have been in previous disasters or who are involved in a family crisis (e.g., parental separation) in addition to the disaster may have more difficulty coping. Counseling may be recommended when these circumstances exist or when the student is unfamiliar and is showing unusual behavior.