FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY FEMA 219 /November 1991

# How to Help Children After a Disaster

## A Guidebook for Teachers

Alameda County Mental Health Services

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# INTRODUCTION

This guide, developed by a team of Alameda County educators and child mental health professionals, is meant to be a resource for the classroom teacher in helping children to recover from the effects of a disaster. Prepared under a grant from the Federal Emergency Management Administration to assist teachers to help children recover from the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989, this guide will help in coping with other general disasters as well as with the mini-disasters that occur in the lives of individual children.

Disasters hit children hard. It's difficult for them to understand and accept that there are events in their lives that can't be controlled or predicted. Worst of all, we adults can't "fix" a disaster, can't solve it, can't keep it from happening again.

Then, what CAN a teacher do?

PLENTY!

- First and foremost, cope with your own natural feelings of helplessness, fear, anger. Until you do this, you won't be much help to the children.
- Put the disaster in context; provide a perspective. Communicate a positive "I'm not helpless" attitude.
- Start the healing process. Help the children to feel relieved and soothed.
- Identify children who may need the intervention of mental health professionals or other helpers beyond the classroom.

* In this guide, you will find ideas for all the above steps plus much more. Please use it as a resource; take what is appropriate to the class and the situation. Above all, use it!

Nancy R. Fernandez

* Disaster Coordinator

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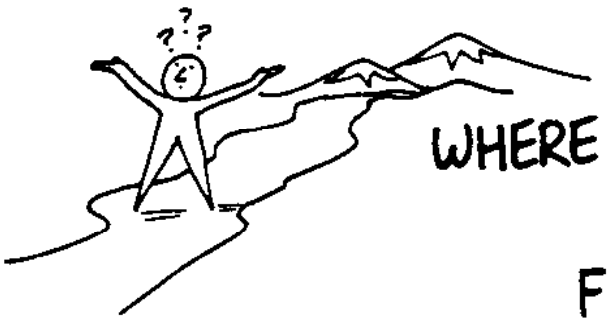


# WHERE DO WE BEGIN?

## FIRST...

## DISASTERS & THEIR EFFECTS

- WHAT IS A DISASTER?

★ *A disaster is a devastating, catastrophic event that can be life-threatening, injury producing, which may create the following distressful experiences...*

*Potential experiences (impacts, feelings, etc.)*

- *Sense of fear, worry*
- *Disruption of home, routine, etc.*
- *Feeling that one's life was threatened*
- *Witnessing injuries, death, pain*
- *Feeling "trapped" and isolated*
- *Being out of control of something threatening to life's basics: food, shelter, clothing, people, comfort...even life itself*
- *Having flashbacks to other catastrophes (i.e. in the case of Southeast Asians, associating loud noises with memories of "bombings")*
- *Feeling cut-off from services*
- *Being separated from loved ones*
- *Having a sense of mortality*
- *Feeling "survivor guilt"*
- *Children are forced to become "parents" to adults who are scared or worried.*

*The impact of the previous experiences might be that some children will show a variety of symptoms of distress, problems.*

> **CAUTION**
> The teacher must <u>first</u> know a child's baseline ("usual") behavior AND cultural/ethnic responses before a teacher can identify "unusual" or problem behavior in a child!

## -EXAMPLES-

### CHARACTERISTICS OF A CHILD WITH A PROBLEM:

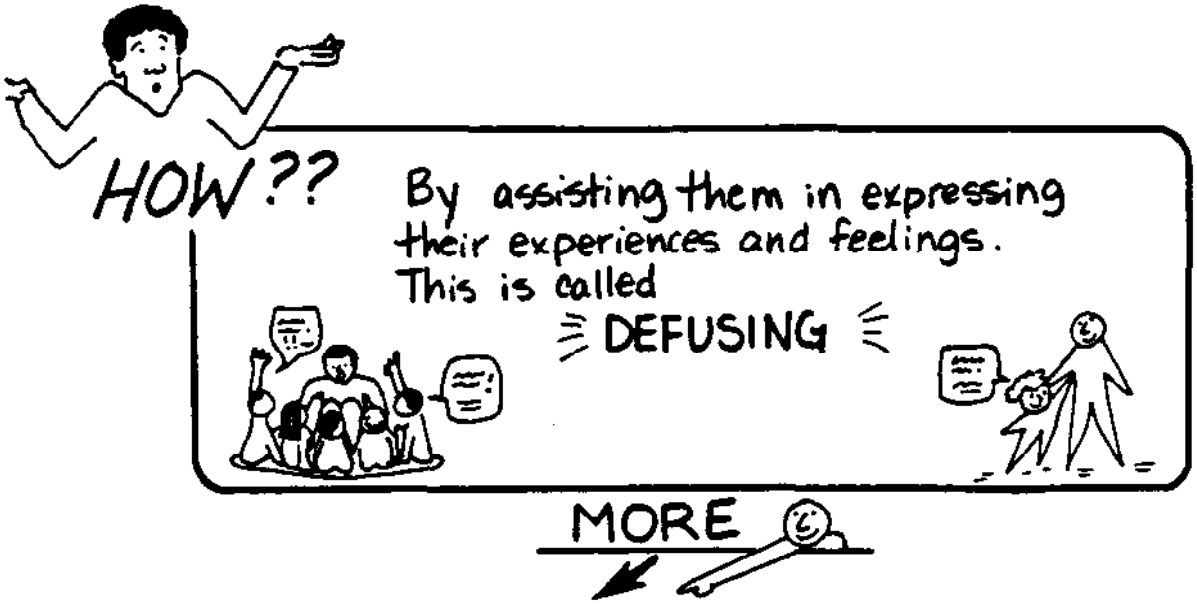
- *Any unusual complaints of illness*
- *Isolated from the rest of the group*
- *Child seems so pressured, anxious that he/she somehow dominates, has to distract others, or is otherwise "needy."*
- *Changed behavior/appearance*
- *Resistant to opening up*
- *No eye contact*

> *Child might just be shy, may have language or cultural barrier...*

> *Note* ..... *In some cultures, making eye contact with adults is "defiant behavior"*

- *Difficulty concentrating, can't focus*
- *"Feisty" or hyperactive/silly, "giddy"*
- *Any emotional display; crying, "regressed" behavior (less than age-appropriate)*
- *Lack of emotional expression.*
- *Poor performance*
- *Can't tolerate change; can't move to next task*
- *Lethargic, apathetic*
- *Easily startled, jumpy*

> CAN CHILDREN WITH THESE PROBLEMS REALLY BE HELPED?




## WHAT IS DEFUSING?

A supportive, personalized, safe, interactive process between individuals in small groups with facilitator(s) that provides/facilitates clarity and complete expression of the event/experiences. It can be emotional. It can help children to develop coping skills and heal.

## YOU MAY HAVE ALSO HEARD OF "DEBRIEFING"...

- Debriefing is a more formal, structured, planned process keyed to a group (not individuals). The focus is to identify and talk about problems, issues which are related to an event. Anyone may speak, and cross-talk is okay. Attempt is made to bring closure to the event and to understand the process the person is in.

NOTE* The defusing process is most effective when you focus on the disastrous event(s) in this sequence:

1. General events
↓
2. Event-specific experiences
↓
3. Personal experiences

EXAMPLE:
*If the event was an earthquake, then do the following:*

1. ("General") – *Talk/draw about earthquakes in general: "earthquakes happen when...", "an epicenter is..." etc.*

↓

Then...

2. ("Event-Specific") – *Talk/draw about the local earthquake you just experienced.*

↓

Then...

3. ("Personal") – *Talk/draw about each person's personal experience in that earthquake.*

NOTE* This process needs to conclude with quiet, reflective time.

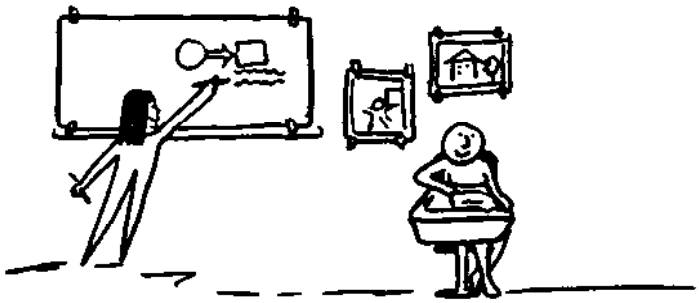
☆ *Remember!... you can use this after ANY KIND OF DISASTER ~*

In using the General to Specific Approach, many tools (methods, activities) may be effective:

Two suggested methods/techniques to use in your class to help defuse children after a disaster are...

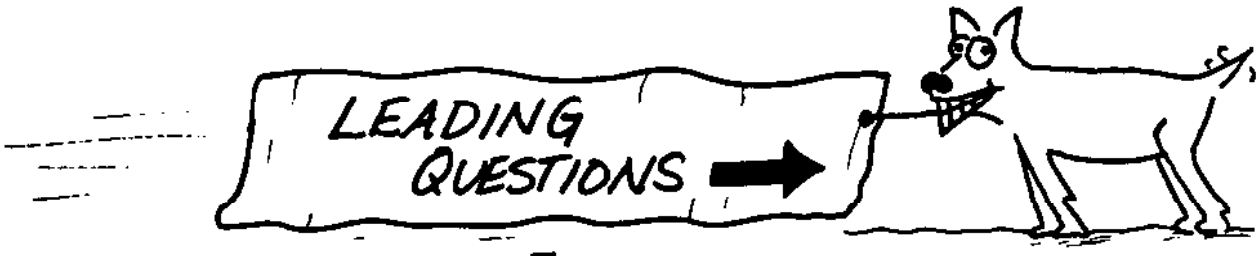
1. THE TALKING METHOD

2. THE DRAWING METHOD

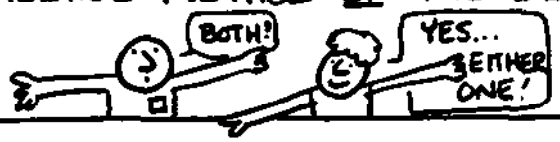


★ THERE ARE SOME LEADING QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTED THEMES YOU CAN USE TO HELP CHILDREN TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES IN EITHER THE

TALKING METHOD OR THE DRAWING METHOD



SUGGESTED QUESTIONS TO ASK/THEMES TO PRESENT FOR EITHER THE TALKING METHOD OR THE DRAWING METHOD:



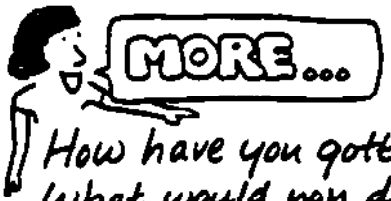

- Where were you when it [the disaster/event] happened?
- What were you doing?
- Where were your friends?
- Where was your family?
- What was your first thought when it happened?
- What were you thinking during it?

Allow for silence for some with low language skills, shyness, discomfort, etc. Especially encourage peer support for these children.

> Note* The teacher should accommodate the child:
> - If a child has low English skills, consider asking for a translator, or a peer to help child to express in words
> - Create a chance for verbal expression in any language

- What did you see? .....?
- What moved? What fell?
- What changed? (Include lifestyle/living conditions!)
- What changed after the [disaster/event]?
- What did you hear?
- What sound did it make? (Allow for yelling, etc. to make sounds)
- What did you smell?
- What did you do after it?
- How did you respond?
- What did you "lose" (misplaced OR broken, destroyed, stolen, etc.)
- How did you feel?
- What did other people around you do (during, after)?
- What was the silliest thing you did?
- Were you or anyone else you know, injured?
- What happened to the animals around you? (Pets, too).
- What dreams did you have after it? (Note* could be related or unrelated)(Either is fine to discuss)
- What reminds you of it? When do you think about it?
- What do you do differently since the [disaster/event]?
- How do you feel now (re. the disaster memories)
- What makes you feel better?
- Was anyone you know, killed in the disaster?

REMEMBER... THE GOAL OF THIS PROCESS IS TO HELP CHILDREN TO FEEL BETTER!




- How have you gotten through rough times before?
- What would you do differently if it happened again?
- How did you help others? How would you help next time?

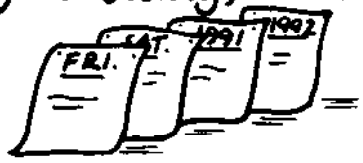
**Note***

As the teacher, you might think of more leading questions to ask the children. Be sure that your questions are

"OPEN >——< ENDED,"

which means that they can not be answered by a "Yes" or "No" only. Open-ended questions facilitate verbal expression.

⇨ Most of these questions would be helpful at any time after a disaster/event, from one day following, to one or more years later.




THERE ARE SOME SPECIFIC HELPFUL

## ACTIVITIES

YOU CAN DO TO ASSIST YOU IN USING THE TALKING AND DRAWING METHODS TO HELP DEFUSE CHILDREN

Remember to use the previous questions as the basis for the following activities!

# 1. THE TALKING METHOD

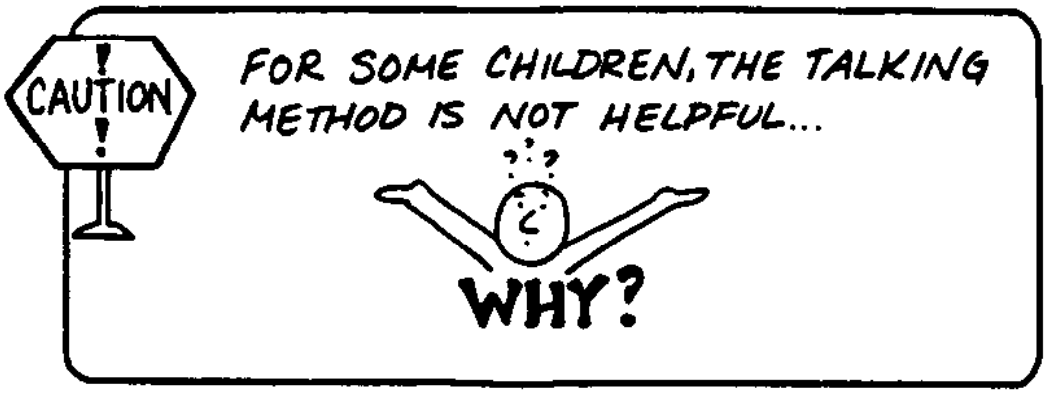
## ACTIVITIES

- Child tells a story - allow metaphors
- Puppets "tell" or "live" a story
- Have an open discussion — using previous questions; ask for volunteers to begin with. Talk "general to specific."
- Use photos, drawings, etc. to facilitate discussions
- Use video prior to discussion to get it going
- Create a skit, play, or do role-playing, related to the disaster. (Provide "dress-up" clothes if available, including uniforms if possible to represent emergency workers seen during the disaster, etc.)
- Do "show and tell" related to the event
- Inform/educate the children about the event to make it less threatening to talk/act about. Make it "familiar."

Note*

Remember to keep yourself in a facilitative/guiding role, not in a role of "control" of the discussions/stories etc. This will be most helpful to the children.

- Reassure the children by verbally acknowledging and "normalizing" their experiences.




* In some cultures, talking openly is not comfortable, appropriate (or even "polite").

* Some children have been raised in families where "talking-out one's feelings" was not possible or supported.

* Some children have been raised in situations other than with family, where talking openly was not practiced.

* Some children simply prefer not to discuss their feelings openly due to personality type, privacy concerns, or lack of trust in the process.

All these reasons should be respected as VALID.

So, here is the other method option for defusing children...

DRAWING →

AN ACTIVE, VISUAL ARTS PROCESS TO EXPRESS FEELINGS...

# 2. THE DRAWING METHOD
## 'A PLAYFUL EXPERIENCE!

## ACTIVITIES

FIRST...

Introduce Drawing as:

- Another way of "talking", but silently
- A means of expression used by many (point out that some people express themselves by talking, some by singing, some by dancing...some by drawing!)

CAUTION

Drawing should be presented to the child as an OPTION for expression, not as a required activity!

☆ Remember to use previous questions to help lead these activities: A QUESTION CAN BECOME A THEME FOR A DRAWING.

ACTIVITIES...

- Draw/write a book together

- Write journals with pictures
- Do a collective drawing - a MURAL

  - Murals tell a "collective story"
  - Murals develop/support teamwork
  - They feel "safer" for some children as opposed to individual art
    - * Teacher should do very little drawing
    - * Give the mural a "place of honor" in the classroom
    - * Allow children to tell teacher what to draw
    - * Make it accessible every day for viewing, additions, etc.
    - * Fill it in on an ongoing basis
    - * "Celebrate" it: use it to demonstrate getting through something tough, facilitate discussions about it, etc.
    - * Take photos/slides of it if/when "completed"
- Computer graphics

- Draw <u>aspects</u> of the event (people, places, activities, etc.)
  - Suggest <u>lots</u> of options, not specifics, e.g.
    - * Rather than saying "draw a fireman, helping someone," say "draw a person you saw doing something helpful after the [disaster]."

- Create a COLLAGE (a combination of "materials")
  - Using a leading question such as "where were you when the [disaster] happened?"

    - * Teacher may draw / paste on the central image
    - * Children cut and paste photos, magazine pictures, articles, fabric pieces, etc. around central theme.
    - * They may also want to draw directly onto it
      - Collages are the "safest" form of "drawing" because child is using others' symbols. The child feels he/she is "losing less of self"
      - Collages can be extremely powerful
      - They provide "boundaries" for the child; this can act as a safety net (emotionally) for some.

> <u>Note</u>* Tell children they may draw what they cannot find in magazines, etc.

☆ Remember when introducing drawing of any sort to clearly say that the goal is not to draw a "pretty picture" but rather, a picture of <u>expression</u>!

- You may also want to look at other pictures (drawings, paintings) and talk about what they communicate. Encourage various views.

> CAUTION! Don't use paint in this method. It is too "loose" of a medium for a traumatized child... the child might use it to bring up things not easily handled in a classroom.

# MORE TIPS, CAUTIONS, PRINCIPLES WHEN USING THE DRAWING METHOD:

- Allow a full range of expression: some kids draw recognizable "things" , others draw "abstracts" . Respect all varieties.

- Allow children to discard their art work
- Emphasize to the children that their work will not be judged, graded or necessarily shown to others.
  - Don't exhibit the artwork if a child does not want it shared by others.
- Reassure them that there is NO "RIGHT WAY" to draw.
- Allow use of various mediums (pastels, crayons, pencils, markers, etc.)
- It's preferable to do the drawing method with more than one adult present
- Exercise as little control as possible over the artwork.

Note* Concluding Drawing Activities:

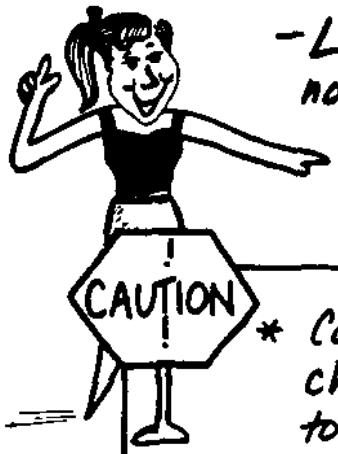
⇨ A key element of the Drawing Method is the discussion of the activities, afterwards. This discussion can help to bring CLOSURE to the experience; an important step of the process of expressing feelings...

- Allow those who want to, to talk about their drawings
- Others will "close" by listening to others.
- Use open-ended questions in this process.

* Sometimes, a child's artwork may be especially expressive of his/her feelings.

* A drawing can give "clues" to some deeper problems/issues/feelings within the child.

* Try to "read" the picture in the same way you might read words. What might it be telling you?



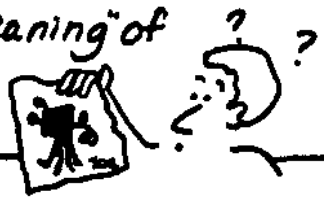

- Look at it as a piece of <u>communication</u>, not just fantasy.

<u>BUT</u>, <u>KEEP IN MIND:</u>

* Colors, forms, etc. have different meanings to children of various cultural backgrounds, and to different children <u>within</u> each culture!

* Regard the artwork as just a <u>piece</u> of what's going on with a child; be sure to look at the child with a holistic view instead!
  - The best source for what's going on behind the drawing, is the child....
    ASK HIM/HER!

* Call on a specialist when you feel it is necessary to explore the "meaning" of the art at a deeper level.



IN BOTH METHODS, YOU MIGHT NOTICE A CHILD EXHIBITING MORE SERIOUS PROBLEMS. HOW DO YOU IDENTIFY THOSE CHILDREN TO A COUNSELOR, OR OTHER PROFESSIONALS AT SCHOOL?

NOTE* A sign of "successful" defusing of your students is that they feel better... yet, another sign of "success" might be that the defusing process surfaced other problems that will come to your attention. These problems might take on a variety of forms.

*How will I recognize a child with an emotional problem, and what should I do to help?*

- *"Symptoms" might be the same as those for anxiety or depression:*
  - *Complaints of physical symptoms*
  - *Persistant avoidance of being alone*
  - *Unrealistic worries about harm*
- *Child is not able to "let go" of a memory; can't "get out of it."*
- *The degree of emotionality, and the degree of silence are both clues*
  - *Be sure to talk with the child and simply ask them quietly, confidentially, how they are feeling, coping.*
- *Make note of other physical manifestations of stress (as a result of the impact of the disaster/event).*
- *(Be aware of different forms of adjustment in each child).*

CAUTION

- Teacher must know the child's baseline behavior and cultural/ethnic responses before identifying "serious problems" in that child.
- The teacher is not meant to be in the role of "diagnostician". At the back of this guidebook are some tips on making referrals for additional professional help.

Some children are at a particularly "high risk" of having serious problems after a disaster/event...

Generally, these are children who have experienced

LOSS, RELOCATION, DEATH, WAR...

☆ These children are more Vulnerable to the effects of disastrous events.

EXAMPLES OF HIGH-RISK CHILDREN:

* Watsonville, California
  - These children experienced some of the strongest effects of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

* Cambodian children
  - Some of the families of these children were afraid to go to "shelters" after the 1989 earthquake because of the memories they have of executions in "shelters/camps" in Cambodia.

* Children living in low income/depressed communities may have also experienced very difficult times: poverty, crime, death, drugs on a daily basis.

* Children from other countries which have had earthquakes, i.e. Mexico, "re-live" those events during a new disaster.

* Children from El Salvador are now being diagnosed as having post-traumatic stress disorders.

HERE IS WHAT YOU CAN DO TO GET FURTHER HELP FOR THE HIGH-RISK CHILDREN AND OTHER CHILDREN WITH SERIOUS PROBLEMS:

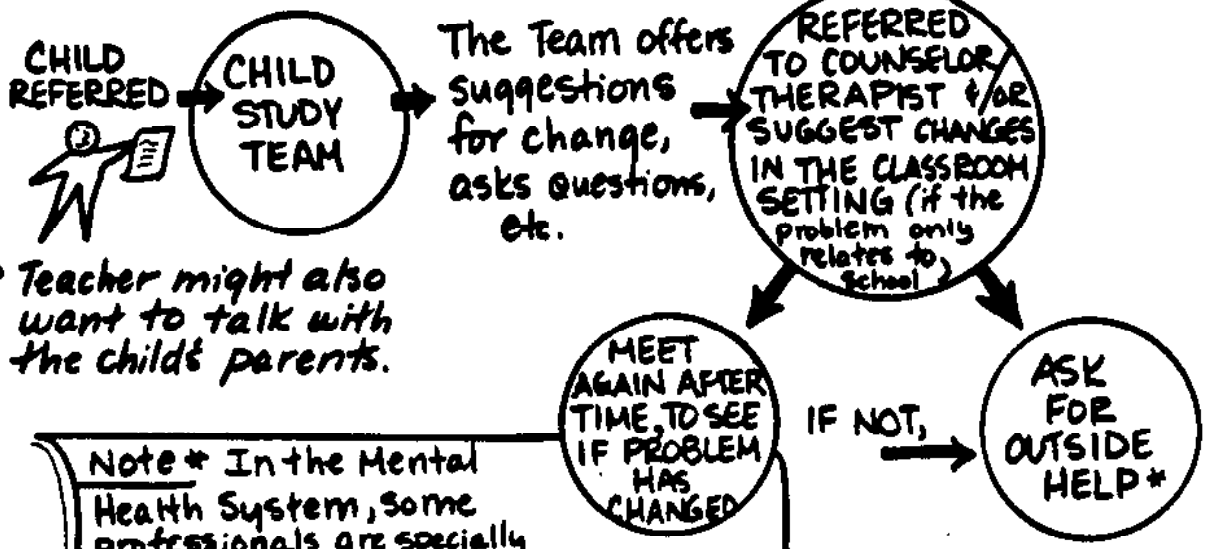
## AT YOUR SCHOOL...

1. There is presently in place, a process for making a referral to a professional who can help the child with his/her problems!

   A. Contact the School Psychologist

   OR

   B. If your school has a Study Team, follow this process




- Teacher might also want to talk with the child's parents.

Note * In the Mental Health System, some professionals are specially trained re. specific disasters
*The M.H. System wants to develop relationships between schools & M.H. Services (Clinics, etc.)

*The outside help might be the County Mental Health Dept. or a mental health professional in the private sector

2. OTHER TIPS:

   - POST THE KIDS' HOTLINE NUMBER:

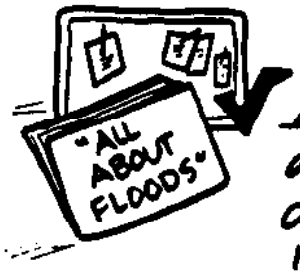
(415) 849-2212

Every classroom should also have the following in place:

✓ <u>A repository</u> – A box, a place where children can drop notes, questions, concerns for the teacher to address.

* This box should be accessible at all times, year-'round.

* The teacher needs to make a plan to ADDRESS each concern in some way




✓ <u>A resource file</u> – A "file" of information and/or a bulletin board of information designed to "educate" the children further regarding disasters.

* The teacher needs to make a plan to create ACCESS to this information; to encourage others to also add to it.

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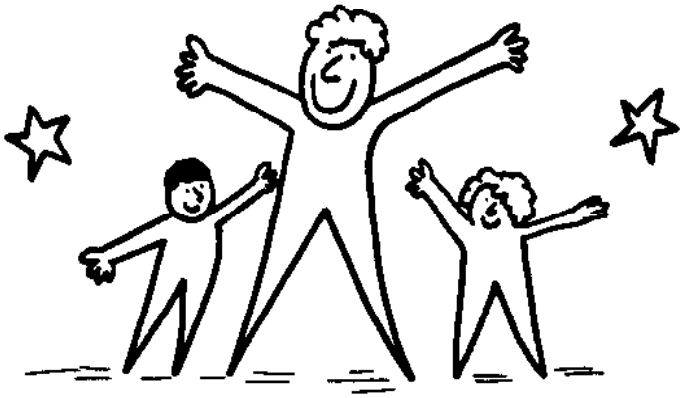
## ! CONGRATULATIONS !



Through using the methods and techniques in this guidebook, and adding your own unique perspective, expertise and energy, you have HELPED CHILDREN and perhaps, yourself recover from a traumatic experience! ★