

Tips for Talking to Students About the Oil Spill Disaster

A Guide for Teachers and School Administrators



Students in the Gulf Coast region have been exposed to the environmental, economic, and community impact of the oil spill disaster. Grief, loss, and change from this ongoing disaster can leave many students feeling anxious, confused, and insecure. Whether students have experienced personal consequences of the oil spill through their family or community, watched it on television, or overheard it being discussed by adults, educators must be informed and ready to help when emotional and physical reactions occur.

The impact of the oil spill may affect students in different ways. For some, their families may have been financially impacted, while others may be fine and not show any reactions, and in some cases their reactions may be similar to other traumatic or disturbing events they have experienced. Knowing the signs that are common at different ages can help teachers and school administrators recognize problems and respond appropriately. Schools can play an important role by reinforcing normal routines and providing students and teachers with information on ways to cope with the stress of this disaster.

Preschool and Kindergarten

Students ages 3–5 may regress to an earlier behavioral stage, cling to a parent or teacher, or become attached to a place where they feel safe. Changes in eating and sleeping habits are also common. Reassurance is key for this age group. Maintain a normal classroom routine and encourage students to express their feelings through play and artwork. Respond to students' questions with simple and clear answers.

Elementary School

Students ages 6–11 may have some of the same reactions that younger children have. They also may withdraw from playgroups and friends, compete more for the attention of teachers, be unwilling to leave home, be less interested in schoolwork, become aggressive, have added conflict with peers or parents, or find it hard to concentrate. Physical reactions such as headaches or stomachaches are also common. These students will benefit from opportunities to express their emotions through play and artwork. Encourage students to participate in recreational activities. Schools should work to create as much stability and consistency as possible.

Middle and High School

Students ages 12–18 are likely to have physical complaints when under stress, and they may be less interested in schoolwork or other responsibilities that they previously handled. Although some students may compete vigorously for attention from teachers, they also may withdraw; resist authority; become disruptive or aggressive at home or in the classroom, which





may manifest as bullying-type behavior; or begin to experiment with high-risk behaviors, such as alcohol or drug use.

Answer questions about the event honestly, but do not dwell on the details or allow the oil spill to dominate classroom time indefinitely. Allow students to express themselves through conversation and writing. Acknowledge that school performance may be affected and consider modifying lesson plans.

In addition to the suggestions above, the following tips can help teachers and school administrators address the needs of the school community affected by this disaster.

Tips for Teachers

- Determine if students and their families have been affected by this disaster so that you are prepared for potential changes in classroom behavior
- Provide opportunities in the classroom to discuss the oil spill if many of your students have been impacted by the disaster, but don't take on the role of a therapist. If a student's behavior or symptoms seem extreme or persist, make a referral to a behavioral health professional.
- Consider engaging parent-teacher associations as a way to discuss the possible ramifications on student learning if the community has been hard-hit by the oil spill
- Offer ways for your students to help each other and the community—such as participating in Gulf Coast cleanup efforts or fundraisers—as a way to demonstrate pro-social behaviors
- Seek or provide extra support for those students who may need additional help to keep up with schoolwork
- Help students understand that it is normal to feel a range of emotions and reactions. Encourage students to express these feelings to adults who can help students understand the experience.
- Recognize that the healing and recovery can take months or even years
- Acknowledge the varying cultural differences of students and their coping practices
- Incorporate age-appropriate art and play activities into your lesson plans, group discussions, and presentations about the oil spill
- Be careful not to label affected students as “troublemakers,” “delinquents,” or “slow learners.” Trauma, loss, and adversity can impact school performance and conduct. These disruptions can often be resolved with appropriate help.
- Inform school administrators if multiple students in your classroom are having problems so administrators are aware, engaged, and able to assist
- Acknowledge that you may also be affected by this disaster; consider taking steps to promote your physical and emotional healing



Hotlines

Oil Spill Distress Helpline

Toll-Free: 1-800-985-5990

National Domestic Violence Hotline

Toll-Free: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

TTY: 1-800-787-3224

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Toll-Free: 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

TTY: 1-800-799-4TTY (4889)

Web Site: <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

Treatment Locator

SAMHSA Treatment Referral Helpline

Toll-Free: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

TTY: 1-800-487-4TTY (4889)

Web Site: <http://www.samhsa.gov/treatment/>

Information Clearinghouse

SAMHSA Health Information Network

Toll-Free: 1-877-726-4727

TTY: 1-800-487-4TTY (4889)

Web Site: <http://www.samhsa.gov/shin>

Helpful Resources

SAMHSA Disaster Technical Assistance Center (DTAC)

Toll-Free: 1-800-308-3515

E-Mail: DTAC@samhsa.hhs.gov

Web Site: <http://www.samhsa.gov/dtac/>

Guide for Parents and Teachers: How to Talk to Kids About the Gulf Oil Spill

Web Site: <https://www.nwf.org/Global-Warming/School-Solutions/Eco-Schools-USA/Become-an-Eco-School/Special-Report/-/media/PDFs/Eco-schools/TeachersGuide-OilSpill.ashx>

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Web Site: <http://www.nctsnet.org>

Oil Spill Educational Resources Guide

Web Site: http://www.doe.state.la.us/lde/misc/oil_spill_resources.aspx

Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) TA Center

Web Site: <http://rems.ed.gov>

Note: Inclusion of a resource in this fact sheet does not imply endorsement by the Center for Mental Health Services, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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Tips for School Administrators

- Provide students, families, and teachers with information on ways to cope with stress due to the oil spill
- Provide information or training to educators and staff on warning signs of serious crisis reactions
- Recognize that teachers may be affected by the oil spill and provide them with resources and opportunities to discuss, share, and provide ongoing support with each other. Consider flexibility regarding sick leave policies as a way to acknowledge the possible impact of the spill.
- Orient teachers to behavioral health resources in the school and surrounding community and make certain that a referral process has been established and understood
- Ensure that teachers know when to make a referral for a student who has emotional or behavioral problems
- Work with behavioral health service providers and partners to help ensure that a variety of services is available to students and staff
- Have behavioral health professionals who are trained in brief interventions available at the school and make that known to students and their caregivers

Note: Some of the information in this tip sheet was adapted from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, the National Association of School Psychologists, and Scholastic.