

Principles for Addressing Trauma, Loss and Grief in Schools

Below is a detailed set of guiding principles for addressing trauma, loss and grief in the school context, which have been developed by the Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network (2009).

These principles have been developed in consultation with school-based personnel and a range of individuals with expertise specific to child and adolescent trauma, loss and grief. These principles have undergone a review process for current opinion of good practice and consistency with the existing evidence base. They form a living, or dynamic, document that is continually edited and updated.

Schools can provide support for children and adolescents affected by trauma, loss and grief in a safe and protective environment.

Schools play an important role in providing a nurturing and protective environment to support children and adolescents experiencing adversity.

Principle 1: Address trauma, loss and grief within the school context

- It is vital to support the position of schools as institutions with primary responsibilities for learning, wellbeing and the physical and psychological safety of children and adolescents.
- Schools play a central role in providing a nurturing and protective environment through times of adversity, including events associated with trauma, loss and grief.

It is important to provide support for schools in their work with children and adolescents affected by trauma, loss and grief by providing responsive resources based on best evidence practice for those who are working within school contexts.

It is necessary to consider how trauma, loss and grief resources and programs can be best implemented within the school context. Whether programs and resources are accepted and are able to be maintained by the school community will depend upon factors such as:

- The experience of the staff in relation to a specific event.
- Individual school staff responses, experiences and self-efficacy in dealing with trauma, loss and grief.
- School wide communication mechanisms.
- The ability to integrate program content into the general curriculum and pre-established programs.

Principle 2: Provide resources and programs that are relevant to the culture of the school community

- Resources are most likely to be utilised when they are considered relevant and applicable to the school context. It is important to consider how best to provide resources and programs to the affected school.
- Resources should be developed in consultation with school leadership teams, principals, teachers, school counsellors and psychologists and school representative organisations where applicable.
- Resources and programs should build upon existing efforts and resources within the schools and be relevant to the school community.
- Resources and programs must be able to be incorporated into the school organisational structures and be consistent with policies held by the broader educational system.

There should be recognition of schools as communities, their interface and interaction with education systems and sectors and their broader communities and the importance of a "whole of school" approach.

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- School communities are comprised of multiple stakeholders including principals, teachers, students, parents and others associated with schools.
- It is important for these stakeholders to have an integrated philosophy, understanding and service provision when responding to trauma, grief and loss.

Principle 3: Address trauma, loss and grief through a whole of school approach

- The needs of these stakeholders should be supported in their capacity for appropriate actions in response to trauma, loss and grief.
- Support is required for those within the differing levels of a school community and between the school community and the wider community recovery processes and services.
- Being part of a community response may lessen risks to individuals within the school community and aid wider school wellbeing.

It is important to provide resources for all members of the school community and continue to support the whole school community and facilitate linkages with the wider community recovery processes in times of adversity.

Staff in schools and school support staff have an important role in supporting children and adolescents affected by adversity. In order to do this, they themselves need support.

Principle 4: Build capacity among school staff

- The personal and professional impact on school staff and support staff of trauma, loss and grief needs to be recognised and provision made for support, and where necessary, professional supervision.
- Resources should also encompass processes that help staff to understand their own personal response to trauma, loss and grief and their capacity to deal with students' experiences.
- Provision needs to be made for professional development opportunities for a range of school personnel and their linked systems.
- It is important to recognise the vital role school staff provide in supporting affected children and adolescents and the personal support required for their own emotional reactions to be able to do this well.

School staff play a vital role in supporting affected children and adolescents and require personal support for their own emotional reactions to be able to do this well.

Families are central to the wellbeing of children and adolescents and therefore, it is important for schools to engage with families.

- Families are very important for the child or adolescent experiencing trauma, loss or grief.
- A school can support a family's capacity to deal with adversities.
- Trauma, loss and grief affect children within the family context and beyond.

Principle 5: Engage with families to address trauma, loss and grief

- Families should be engaged in the school support processes, bearing in mind that they may have their own needs at these times.
- Families need good quality and helpful information about normal reactions at these times, including how and where to get support.
- Supporting families to support their children in times of adversity requires good communication between the school, the child, the family and counsellors.
- Involving families can be complex, and schools may benefit from developing strategies to facilitate their involvement.

It is important to acknowledge that schools and families often form the basis of support for children and adolescents affected by adversity. Working and communicating together about a child's wellbeing is important.

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While acknowledging the distress and effects of adverse events related to trauma, grief and loss, it is important to recognise resilience in children and adolescents dealing with such events.

- The response provided by schools should focus on expectations for resilience and normal adaptation while providing sensitive support over time. Most people cope with adversity when supported.

Principle 6: Respond to trauma, loss and grief within the context of enhancing resilience and normal adaptation while providing sensitive support over time

- Compassionate understanding of the child's experience should be informed by hopeful and positive expectations for the child's progressive adaptations to the effects of trauma, loss and grief.
- Knowledge of the potentially adverse effects of trauma, loss and grief is important in the understanding and support of affected children and adolescents.
- Understanding the developmental stage of the child, the nature of the event and the available resources are key factors to be considered when planning responses for the school and the individual child.

The child's experience, developmental stage, resilience, resources and context are all factors to be considered when planning to respond to trauma, loss and grief.

It is important to recognise and respectfully respond to the differential patterns of needs, strengths and pathways that schools and their multiple and diverse stakeholders have in relation to trauma, loss and grief.

Principle 7: Take account of the diversity of responses to trauma, loss and grief

- Recognise the needs and human rights of all children and adolescents – particularly their right to learn.
- Support for diversity should include enhancing and normalising the various understandings of trauma, loss and grief and the ways these might affect children, adolescents and their families.
- It is important for schools to respect differences in cultural expectations for trauma, loss and grief reactions and responses.

Different cultures respond to trauma, loss and grief in differing ways. Recovery programs need to incorporate the profile of the school community. It is important that resources and advice are culturally inclusive.

Trauma, loss and grief experiences may be stressful and can affect a child's wellbeing, learning, mental and physical health and functioning.

Principle 8: Work with the child's or adolescent's behavioural, social and academic responses to trauma, loss and grief

- A child's behaviour in the family or school setting may change following a traumatic event or bereavement; these behavioural changes may indicate the child's underlying or ongoing distress and uncertainties.
- The child or adolescent may become withdrawn or display difficult behaviours or moodiness, regression or being unusually needy.
- The child's behavioural responses frequently resolve in the early days and weeks, however there can be continued disruption to the child's functioning and learning.

Children and adolescents respond to trauma, loss and grief in a range of ways, including changes in capacity for learning and physical and psychological wellbeing.

A range of support processes and strategies are likely to be beneficial for children, adolescents, families and members of the school community. A continuum of response within schools is necessary to address both the variety of student needs and the staff capacity to work with students' trauma, loss and grief issues.

Principle 9: Utilise a range of support responses for trauma, loss and grief within the school and community

- Optimally, support should be provided in a broad or generic way within the school setting rather than singling out individuals for special attention, separate to their peers.
- Support can include the provision of information, practical strategies and emotional support.
- Recognition of individual needs is important.
- Support should be age appropriate.
- The continuum of care should include opportunities for referral to school-based psychologists and counsellors and to specialist external agencies for more complex issues and reactions.

Good communication between school, family and external agencies can facilitate the capacity of the school and relevant staff to respond and provide optimal support to students and their families.

- There may be particular instances where the school response must be made within the context of a broader legal, health or welfare framework, for instance where there are issues of child protection, disease control or criminal investigation.

Principle 10: Engage with external agencies focused on trauma, loss and grief

- Support should be provided in a manner that is attuned to the child's particular needs and that of the lead agency.
- It is beneficial to establish and maintain good working relationships with relevant external agencies within the requirements of confidentiality and privacy.
- Partnerships between schools and external agencies can facilitate the provision of support, information, advice and training.

It is important to establish and maintain linkages and communication with existing emergency response and management agencies.

Resources and programs informed by the best evidence and knowledge about trauma, loss and grief relevant to schools should be available for school principals, teachers and other stakeholders and should underpin practices within the school.

Principle 11: Utilise best practice for trauma, loss and grief

- Programs and resources should fit with the learning and nurturing / protective goals of schools.
- Programs should be supported with a quality professional development program based on up-to-date, relevant, best evidence practice.
- Relevant education and training programs for schools include the effects of trauma, loss and grief for children and adolescents and the processes that may facilitate their healthy adaptation and when referral systems may be needed.
- Professional development and training should be available across a range of levels within the educational system and be designed to include the transitions and challenges integral to trauma, loss and grief experiences.
- Professional development should be appropriate to the context of the school and the relationship that school personnel have with students and their families, as well as having core elements relevant to all staff, with additional levels of expertise as required.
- The roles of school counsellors and other mental health professionals associated with school communities should be identified as being able to provide support for affected children, adolescents and families as well as members of the school community.

Taken from:

http://www.earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au/resource_hubs/early_childhood_schools_hub/principles_full/