

ADDRESSING THE EFFECTS OF TRAUMA ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN HOMELESS SITUATIONS: THE IMPORTANCE OF DECISION-MAKING

Natural disasters and other unexpected tragic circumstances place children and their families in very traumatic situations. Simply being in a homeless situation, regardless of the precipitating factors, is often very traumatic. Trauma causes children and families to feel out of control. Their day-to-day existence becomes unpredictable and chaotic. They often feel that they are helpless to bring order and a semblance of “normalcy” into their own lives. It is of the utmost importance for them to feel a sense of safety, security, and community support. When discussing school of origin issues with parents and students who have been through a traumatic situation keep the following key points in mind:

- Families may need time to talk and think about what is in their child’s best interest. This may not be the right time for them to make a snap decision.
- Families need to feel in control of their own lives – at least in some small part. One means of doing so, is to begin making everyday decisions. Making an informed decision about whether it is in the best interest of their child to attend his/her school of origin may well be one of the decisions that brings about a needed sense of control.
- Empathy and compassion are very important in this decision making process. School staff can gently guide parents through a discussion of what elements in school selection are most important to themselves and their child.
- Individuals often make decisions to satisfy a ‘feeling need.’ This is even more likely in the aftermath of trauma. While the logistics of transportation—distance, time on a bus, times at which the bus must be met—must be addressed, it is also important for school personnel to be aware of the family’s after-trauma, emotional needs for safety, security, supportive community, well being of their child, and to once more be able to order and predict their day-to-day life.

Research shows that it is often not the trauma itself, but rather what occurs in response to the trauma, that determines the amount of time and completeness of recovery. School personnel are in the unique position of being able to help children and families make choices that bring a sense of control, address feeling needs, and achieves some sense of normalcy and routine in their lives.

For more information regarding trauma and homelessness see:

“Facts on Trauma and Homeless Children” National Child Traumatic Stress Network
www.NCTSNet.org <http://www.ed.gov/news/hurricane/index.html>

<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/primer.asp>

<http://www.neahin.org>

<http://www.serve.org/nche/katrina/students.php>

<http://www.ag.uiuc.edu/~disaster/teacher/teacher.html>

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/planningneeds.pdf>

<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/mentalhealth>

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