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Memorial Activities Related to War, Terrorism, or Other Large-Scale Trauma Suggestions for Schools

School memorial activities following a traumatic experience can serve an important function in the healing process for students, families, and staff. Such activities provide the opportunity to express emotions through a variety of ways besides talking, and can help people move on with regular school activities. Memorial activities can take many forms, from tree planting or writing letters and cards, to more traditional “services.” It is best to plan a variety of activities rather than only one “big” event because some students will be more comfortable, and more comforted by, one activity versus another.

Memorial activities regarding large-scale events such as a terrorist attack or war have a somewhat different focus compared to memorials following a student or staff death or even multiple deaths following a school shooting or natural disaster. “Closure” may be difficult to achieve, even after several weeks, due to ongoing uncertainty about the situation and/or fear of further danger. In such situations, a significant purpose of a memorial activity is to bring people together in order to express feelings and concerns as a group in order to reduce feelings of isolation and vulnerability. In the case of war, a major focus is to honor the sacrifice of the lost soldier(s). A further purpose is to encourage everyone to think about ways—even very small steps—that can be taken to increase feelings of security and reduce conflicts that can lead to violence at all levels.

Guidelines for Planning School Memorial Activities

Any discussion of memorials must include a caution regarding suicide deaths. Although not typically relevant to memorials related to the war, it is important for school personnel always to keep in mind that all-school memorials or activities and events are not recommended following suicide. They run the risk of communicating to some vulnerable students that death is a way to obtain incredible amounts of attention. In other instances, however, participation in memorial activities can be beneficial, even when students or school personnel do not know any of the victims or their families. The following are key points for schools to consider:

- Memorial activities should be based on the needs and desires of the school community.
- Schools should form a committee that includes administrators, teachers, parents, students, and perhaps even community members to plan memorial activities. It is very important to involve students in the planning process including those who had personal ties to the victim(s) if possible.

- Memorial events can be planned as a series of activities, not just the more traditional permanent marker or structure in memory of those who died. In fact, in many cases activities are as beneficial and timelier than a permanent memorial. Schools can hold group “services” as well as involve classrooms in creating their own tributes, artwork, cards, letters, etc.
- Memorial activities—at least the initial activity—should take place within one week of the event if possible.
- If planning a permanent memorial, proceed slowly and solicit a wide range of input from students, staff, and families. Some permanent memorials may take a long time to develop as we saw with the Oklahoma City memorial and rebuilding of the World Trade Center property. Be sure to conduct some form of memorial activity in the near-term as well.

Suggested Memorial Activities

- A temporary memorial site can be established. Flowers, notes, poems, ribbons, stuffed animals, pictures and other objects can be brought by students and staff to a designated location at school to pay tribute to those who died and those who continue to help and protect us here at home and overseas. School and community input should be obtained to determine if a more permanent place for these objects is feasible or to otherwise determine an appropriate, sensitive way to dismantle the memorial site. The location of permanent memorials at school should be considered very carefully and locations other than main entrances are recommended.
- Schools and communities who have experienced significant traumas often look for what is termed as “the gift of hope.” For example, setting up a scholarship fund or implementing activities and projects that will make a difference and prevent similar tragedies in the future. Following violent events, activities and curriculum that address tolerance and bullying would be appropriate “gifts.”
- Writing activities can be particularly helpful for students of all ages. Students can write and send cards, letters, and posters to the families of the victims (in care of a support organization such as the Red Cross or the military,) to our troops, or those involved in rescue work (police and fire personnel). Older students might also write to local, state, or national leaders.
- Be sure to involve all students, including those with disabilities. Activities can be tailored to the cognitive and emotional development levels of all students. Special education staff can be helpful in assuring that all students feel included and that activities are appropriate for them.

Developmental Considerations

Memorial activities should take into account the developmental level of students involved. The following offers examples of how this can be done.

- Young children need to do something to express their grief, even though they may not really understand all that has happened. Drawings—to hang up in the school hallway, to send to the firemen and policemen who helped victims, to send to school children in disaster areas—

are an excellent way for young children to express and share their feelings. They can also perform songs or read poems as part of a school-wide memorial service.

- Adolescents need activities that provide them with a sense of contribution to the school's and community's efforts, not only in recognition of the event and honoring the victims, but in preventing such tragedies in the future. Involve middle school and high school students in all aspects of planning memorial activities, including performing as well as helping with setting up and cleaning up; gather their suggestions for prevention of such events—such as ideas about improving security (locally or more globally) and increasing tolerance and peaceful conflict resolution. Students might be encouraged to write members of Congress or appropriate agencies with their suggestions. In response to terrorism or war-related events, older students might study the principals of freedom and democracy and how they can positively participate as citizens of the United States and the world, and/or discuss political and religious issues that might help explain the origins of hatred and fanaticism.

Specific Guidelines for School Memorial Services

- Involve students of all ages in planning the service.
- Keep the memorial service brief and appropriate to the age of the students. For elementary students, 15-20 minutes is appropriate; for older students, up to an hour.
- Include music and student performances. Playing soothing music as people enter and leave the service will help set and maintain a calm mood.
- Preview the service with students, parents, and staff ahead of time. Teachers should help students anticipate how this will be different from typical school assemblies, and should discuss appropriate behavior.
- Have several brief speakers. Select individuals who are well known to students and who represent security and safety—people who students can recognize as able to provide reassurances and support (mayor, superintendent, police chief or school liaison officer, etc.)
- Invite family members to attend.
- For memorial services/programs, all staff and students should be invited to attend; however, they should not be required to do so. Such programs can be very powerful in uniting the school community, and send the message that each individual is important. However, “one size does not fit all” when it comes to memorials. Provide a quiet activity as an alternative for students who chose not to attend (or whose parents object to such services/programs).
- Involve classrooms by inviting them to bring and hang a class banner or poster to honor the victims or promote peace.
- Use symbols of life and hope in memorial activities. Balloons and candles can be used very effectively to promote a positive, uplifting message that acknowledges pain and sadness yet also is hopeful for the future.

- Following a school-wide memorial service, students should return to their classrooms for at least a short time prior to dismissal. This allows time to talk with each other, their teacher or a mental health staff member (if available) to discuss the experience. Ensure that memorials are scheduled at time that allows for such discussion.

Follow-Up Activities

Particularly following events that present on going stresses (i.e., the war is still ongoing, recovery efforts will be slow, identification of perpetrators may not be resolved quickly, the impact of the event has long-term consequences, etc.), it is important for schools to consider an activity to address ongoing concerns. Schools might consider:

- Linking with other community efforts (such as food drives or other donation activities to displaced individuals).
- Establishing and implementing civic, conflict resolution, tolerance and other instructional programs that have long-term prevention goals.
- Establishing an ongoing memorial “fund” for disaster relief for current and future tragedies.

For further information on promoting tolerance among children and youth, contact NASP at (301) 657-0270 or visit NASP’s website at www.nasponline.org. **In particular the document Memorial Activities At School: A List of "Do's" and "Don'ts"** may be helpful to your memorial planning.

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