

# How Schools Can Help Children Recover from Traumatic Experiences

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina—and then Hurricane Rita—hundreds of thousands of school children were displaced from their homes and schools. The kind of trauma these children experienced as a result of the loss of their homes, familiar surroundings, and, sometimes, even family members and friends, can have serious long-term consequences. Although the schools that absorbed these displaced children were in a unique position to help them by providing mental health support, they had limited information and resources with which to determine the children's needs and provide appropriate help.

Working with the RAND Gulf States Policy Institute, RAND Health researchers interviewed school personnel in four of the most heavily affected states—Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, and Alabama—to assess the types of information schools need most to help students displaced or otherwise affected by natural disasters, community or personal violence, and other traumatic events. Using the information they gathered, the researchers developed a program guide, which they call a *tool kit*, that describes a variety of school-based mental health programs for students exposed to trauma. Some of the tools include

- guidance on forming small implementation teams and on assessing treatment needs
- information on selecting children for trauma programs, including reliance on referrals from counselors or teachers, or from parents, as well as targeted and general school screening
- detailed descriptions of 24 trauma-focused programs that have been used worldwide, with information on how to get program materials—for example, the Friends and New Places Program, which helped 1,100 students displaced to the Dallas Independent School District following Hurricane Katrina; and Cognitive-Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS), developed jointly by RAND, UCLA, and the L.A. Unified School District
- comparisons of programs focused on general trauma, disaster-related trauma, traumatic loss, exposure to violence, and complex trauma
- currently available funding options to obtain program materials and train staff, as well as ways to identify new sources of funding
- additional resources that schools can use to help students in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event.

According to many school personnel the team interviewed, the greatest barriers to helping students following the hurricanes were not knowing what mental health programs they should use and the lack of staff who were trained to implement these types of programs. *How Schools Can Help Students Recover from Traumatic Experiences: A Tool Kit for Supporting Long-Term Recovery* puts this information in the hands of schools so that it is available before a disaster happens. Plans are under way to make the tool kit available as a Web-based search tool.

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