

## Note to the Principal

**It is the responsibility of the principal, in consultation with the Board and School Trauma Response Teams, to evaluate whether this approach is appropriate for students, considering their age, stage of development, prior functioning, as well as other relevant factors.**

This document must be accompanied by the following resources:

- Speaking notes to be used by staff (developed collaboratively by the Communications Manager and Family of School Superintendent/AO)
- Handout: *Supporting Children After a Traumatic Event / Supporting Adolescents After a Traumatic Event*

It is up to the elementary principal to determine whether intermediate students receive the above-mentioned handout geared to children or to adolescents.

A plan addressing the following considerations needs to be determined before sharing this document with staff:

- Support for a staff member who is not comfortable leading the discussion
- Replacement of a staff member who is unable to lead the discussion
- Process for students requiring additional support to leave the classroom and go to a pre-determined, alternative location
- Determination of the alternative location(s) and supports for students known to be at elevated risk (e.g., Special Education needs, prior trauma concerns, direct connection to incident of concern)
- Support to students experiencing duress during the classroom discussion (e.g., on-call staff to respond to student needs)
- Support to staff should problems occur during the classroom discussion
- Process to refer students needing additional support to the School Trauma Response Team
- Follow up with teachers on all classroom discussions

This resource is grounded in Restorative Practice. When Restorative Practice is a way of thinking and being in a classroom, it creates the conditions for students and staff to better cope should a traumatic event occur. As such, it is highly recommended that Restorative Practice, including circles, be used as a proactive approach to cultivate community in all classrooms.

# LEADING A CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AFTER A TRAUMATIC EVENT

## GUIDELINES FOR TEACHERS

### What is a classroom discussion following a traumatic event?

A classroom discussion following a traumatic event is a structured process to:

- Share information
- Express feelings
- Address needs and concerns
- Foster healthy coping responses
- Re-establish classroom routines, and
- Support those affected, using a restorative approach

When done in a thoughtful and informed way, a classroom discussion can help a school community begin to move forward toward greater understanding, mutual support, and ultimately, healing.

### Why discuss traumatic events with your class?

Having a discussion with your class after a traumatic event can be helpful to:

- Provide factual information and reduce the spread of rumours
- Return the class to a calm and focused learning environment
- Begin to establish a sense of routine, safety, and comfort
- Foster healthy coping responses and encourage social connections
- Share supports that are available to students
- Identify students requiring additional supports and connect those students with the appropriate resources

### Before the classroom discussion

Before beginning a discussion with your class, you should consider the following:

- Emotional readiness to lead the discussion
  - Ensure that you are emotionally ready to deliver the message. If you are unable to lead the discussion or will require additional support, speak with the School Trauma Response Team
- Classroom set-up
  - Consider arranging the class in a circle where staff and students are seated on the same level and can see each other. A talking piece (e.g., talking stick, stuffed animal) may bring comfort and may help with turn-taking
  - Consider whether a strategic seating plan is needed (e.g., proximity to provide additional emotional support, safety considerations)
- Materials
  - Ensure that there are tissues in the class
  - Bring materials provided during the staff meeting to support the discussion (e.g., speaking notes)

## Before the classroom discussion (Continued)

- Alternative location for small group discussion / individual support
  - Review the process to send students needing more in-depth support (i.e., small group discussion/ individual support) to the alternative location
  - Before beginning the classroom discussion, direct students you know to be at elevated risk and unlikely to respond well to the discussion (e.g., special education needs, prior trauma concerns, direct connection to incident of concern) to the predetermined alternative location to seek more in-depth support
- Preparation for speaking with your class
  - Practice a strategy that may help you feel calm (e.g., deep breathing, visualization, rehearsing)

## During the classroom discussion

As the discussion leader, you play an important role in creating a safe and comforting environment. As you strive to do your best in a challenging situation, these tips will help you in leading the classroom discussion:

- Model calmness (e.g., body language, tone of voice, non-verbal communication)
- Use straightforward, simple language. In stressful times, processing information can be more difficult
- Be mindful of the needs of the students in the class (e.g., ELL, Special Education)
- Allow adequate time for discussion
- Allow for pauses and silence
- Focus on the facts. It is okay to say “I don’t know”
- Reserve judgement and personal opinions
- Present objective and credible information with sensitivity
- Monitor students’ responses, both verbal and non-verbal. Allow a student experiencing duress to seek more in-depth support in the alternative location. Provide the option of that student being accompanied by a supportive friend
- If student behaviour compromises the safety of self or others, discontinue the discussion
- **Call for additional support, if needed**

A multidisciplinary team at the Durham District School Board has created the following guidelines to assist you in leading the classroom discussion. These guidelines consist of a structure (i.e., preamble, sharing the facts, processing, transitioning) as well as sample prompts. Please follow these guidelines when leading the discussion.

## After the classroom discussion

After the classroom discussion, it is important to:

- Be observant and check-in with students who may need additional support
- Refer students who you feel require additional support to the School Trauma Response Team
- Connect with a member of the School Trauma Response Team and provide an overview of the classroom discussion. This process will be coordinated by the School Trauma Response Team
- Recognize that traumatic events affect people in different ways and be sensitive to the individual and collective needs of your students
- Be aware of your own needs and seek help when needed

# LEADING A CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AFTER A TRAUMATIC EVENT

## GUIDELINES FOR TEACHERS – SAMPLE PROMPTS

Please use the following structure (i.e., preamble, sharing the facts, processing, transitioning) and sample prompts when leading your classroom discussion.

| SAMPLE PROMPTS |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| PREAMBLE       | <p><b>Introduce the discussion</b></p> <p>We are going to spend some time today talking about what has happened. This is difficult for all involved.</p> <p>Let's all sit down together. I have some important news to share with you, and I want to make sure that I have your attention for the next several minutes.</p> <p>You may have heard about what happened yesterday. For some, you will be hearing about it for the first time. We are going to spend some time today talking about what has happened.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|                | <p><b>Explain the purpose</b></p> <p>As you can see, we are sitting in a circle for us to share information, express feelings, talk about our concerns, what we need, and how to cope in a healthy way.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|                | <p><b>Establish norms for sharing</b></p> <p>Before we begin, I want to talk about how we share in this kind of discussion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidentiality is important. We need to respect the privacy of others</li> <li>• Please keep your phones away for privacy reasons and so that we can all be present in our discussion</li> <li>• Everyone will have the chance to speak but there is no obligation to share. Some people may prefer to listen more than speak, but can still benefit from hearing what others say</li> <li>• Our class discussion will be a structured process that I will lead. If you would like to speak with me one-on-one after the discussion, please do so</li> <li>• We need to be respectful of the feelings of others. That means we need to use respectful language and we all must be mindful of our statements</li> <li>• We all have different needs – In a big group like this, we need to be aware of how what we say can impact others. It is important to be able to talk about those things; however, those conversations are best one-on-one and not in a group like this</li> <li>• Today's discussion will last about 20 minutes but I can be flexible if we need more time</li> </ul> |
|                | <p><b>Offer alternative location</b></p> <p>I know that this information may be difficult for some to hear. It may bring up other memories and bring on strong feelings. For those who feel that this will be especially challenging, you can go to <i>(following the procedure and location established by administration)</i> to speak in a smaller group, or one-on-one.</p> <p><i>(Allow those students to exit as this time)</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |

| SAMPLE PROMPTS    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| SHARING THE FACTS | <p><b>Briefly name the incident</b></p> <p>You all may have heard what happened. Yesterday, there was a tragic/difficult event<br/> <i>(Take a moment to let the information sink in and to assess student response)</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|                   | <p><b>Normalize the range of feelings and reactions</b></p> <p>People express their feelings in a variety of ways. It is normal to feel very upset, confused, or even angry about what has happened. Some people here might not even know how to feel about it. I have many feelings about it myself, but right now, it is important for me to make sure that you have the information that you need and to try to answer any questions that you might have.</p> <p>Remember that this information may affect each person in this room a bit differently, and that is okay. There is room and respect for all kinds of feelings.</p> |
|                   | <p><b>Summarize what happened</b></p> <p>I want to share what we know about what happened. You may have some questions right now but it is important that I get through the information. I will make time to answer your questions afterwards. <i>(Use speaking points provided by administration)</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|                   | <p><b>Redirecting unverified information</b></p> <p>The information that I'm sharing today is the messaging from... (e.g., the school board, the police, the principal). It is important that we focus on the facts that have been confirmed.</p> <p>It sounds like that information has come from the media or another source. We are going to focus on the facts that have been provided. <i>(There should be no ongoing discussion about what has been reported in the media or other unconfirmed facts)</i></p> <p>I haven't heard that, but what has been shared is...</p>                                                      |
| SAMPLE PROMPTS    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| PROCESSING        | <p><b>Answer questions and gather information for current needs and concerns</b></p> <p>This is also an opportunity for you to ask questions and to share your thoughts, if you like. Is there anyone who would like to do so?</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|                   | <p><b>Express care and concern for those who appear emotional/distressed (i.e., verbal/non verbal)</b></p> <p><i>Concern and care can be expressed non-verbally (e.g., passing a box of Kleenex, a caring look) and verbally (see examples below).</i></p> <p>I know that this is upsetting.</p> <p>It is understandable that...</p> <p>I can imagine that...</p> <p>It can't be easy to...</p> <p>I'm sorry that this has happened.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                             |

|                       |                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                       | <p><b>Address inappropriate comments /Redirect</b></p>                                                 | <p>Let's think back to what we discussed at the beginning of our discussion. We said...</p> <p>There may be a range of opinions but we must be sensitive to others in the room.</p> <p>For most of us, hearing too much detail is upsetting and can be difficult to get out of your head. I ask that we all be aware of that in our group discussion and remind you that we can speak one-on-one after.</p>                                                                                                                |
|                       | <p><b>Reinforce the capacity of people to cope with difficult circumstances</b></p>                    | <p>We all deal with stress in different ways, what works for some may not work for others. Here is some information...</p> <p><i>For younger students</i> – I will be sending a letter home for your parents.</p> <p><i>For older students</i> - This handout outlines... We will make the same information available for your parents.</p> <p><i>(Refer to handout – Supporting Children After a Traumatic Event / Supporting Adolescents After a Traumatic Event)</i></p>                                                |
|                       | <p><b>Support available to students</b></p>                                                            | <p>Today's discussion doesn't have to end here. If you have any other questions, or need to speak with someone you can... Your well-being is what is most important to us and we are here to help.</p> <p>You may not feel that you need support now, but remember, over the coming days and months there are supports available.</p> <p>This handout outlines where you can get help.</p> <p><i>(Refer to handout – Supporting Children After a Traumatic Event / Supporting Adolescents After a Traumatic Event)</i></p> |
| <b>SAMPLE PROMPTS</b> |                                                                                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>TRANSITIONING</b>  | <p><b>Indicate next steps to be taken to help individuals recover (e.g., school response plan)</b></p> | <p>I have been told by the office that there will be... if you are interested in attending.</p> <p>If any new information comes in, I will be sure to pass it on to you.</p> <p>More information will be shared as it becomes available.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|                       | <p><b>Conclude the classroom discussion</b></p>                                                        | <p>Thank you for being part of this discussion. We'll finish up with some of our lesson during the time that we have left, and then we will continue with our day. You can find me (<i>share location</i>) later on today if you would like to talk. The counsellors that I mentioned earlier will be in the school all day too. You will find them in (<i>share location</i>). Please feel free to stop by and speak with them. Remember that you can always speak with any staff member.</p>                             |

## A SAMPLE LETTER ON GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS

*(Reprinted from: Child Guidance Clinic, 2002)*

Traumatic events, such as a student injury or death typically occur suddenly, with little or no time to prepare for the traumatic event. They are unpredictable and outside of our expected life experience. Parents and their children are often overwhelmed by the traumatic event, and regular methods of coping are likely not effective. In these situations, parents may require extra support and may need to learn new ways of managing their feelings.

Below are suggestions to help you and your child in the event of a crisis. Additional support is available from your school. For more information, please contact \_\_\_\_\_.

- Limit the amount of media exposure you and your child see and hear about the event
- Take your child's lead on when, what, and how much to say
- Listen to your child's fears, feelings, and thoughts
- Answer your child's questions honestly and with information and supports that are appropriate to his or her developmental age, and level of understanding
- Don't worry about not having all of the answers
- Encourage your child to talk about his or her concerns related to the situation and reassure him or her without denying the seriousness of the situation
- If appropriate, encourage your child to express his or her feelings through drawing, writing, as well as talking
- Reading age-appropriate books about similar incidents can provide a beginning for discussions about your child's feelings. Be cautious about the books used to ensure that the message is appropriate
- Spend extra time with your child to help re-establish his or her feelings of safety
- Stay close to your child; your physical presence will be reassuring and it will give you an opportunity to monitor his or her reactions
- Provide extra support at bedtime, e.g., a night light, a special stuffed toy, allowing siblings to sleep in the same room
- Physical affection may be very comforting to your child

- Resume normal routines at your home as soon as possible. Avoid unnecessary changes which could add additional stress
- Be patient; your child may ask the same questions over and over as they seek reassurance and deal with his or her confusion and fear. In addition, older children may become distant or hard to manage as they cope with the trauma. Older children may feel more comfortable discussing the trauma with their peers
- Find support for your own personal fears and anxieties, since your reactions will influence your child's reactions
- Monitor your child's reactions and request assistance from support staff at the school if you are worried, or need further advice

## SAMPLE: SUPPORTING CHILDREN AFTER A TRAUMATIC EVENT

Children react to a traumatic event in a variety of ways. It is common for children to show some changes in behaviour and/or difficulties in managing their emotions following exposure to a traumatic event. These responses may occur soon after the event or may present long after the event.

Some reactions that you might observe in elementary age children may include:

- Fears of separation and clinginess towards teachers or primary caregivers
- Re-creation of the traumatic event (e.g., through talk, play, drawing)
- Difficulty at bedtime and when sleeping (e.g., avoiding sleep, waking up in the night, nightmares)
- Increased physical complaints (e.g., headaches, stomach aches, rapid heartbeat)
- Changes in behaviour (e.g., appetite, agitation, angry outbursts, decreased attention, withdrawal)
- Over or under-reacting to stimuli (e.g., touch, lights, sudden movements, sounds)
- Difficulty with everyday routines
- Increased distress (e.g., crying, unusually whiny, irritable, moody, feeling down)
- Feelings of anxiety, fear, and worry about personal safety and the safety of others
- Worry about a re-occurrence of the traumatic event
- New fears (e.g., fear of the dark, animals, monsters)
- Statements and questions about the event
- Changes in school performance
- Difficulty with authority, redirection, or criticism
- Unusually flat affect/emotion (e.g., absence of typical emotional response, quiet, withdrawn)
- Emotional numbing (e.g., seeming to have no feeling about the event)
- A return to earlier ways or behaviours (e.g., baby talk, bedwetting, thumb sucking)

Here are some things you can do at home to help your child:

- Consult a qualified mental health professional if you feel your child requires additional support
- Assure your child of his/her safety at home and at school
- Reassure your child that he/she is not responsible for the event. Some children may blame themselves for events, even those completely out of their control
- Allow your child to express his/her fears verbally or through play
- Provide an opportunity for your child to talk about the event, in a safe, caring and supportive environment
- Speak to your child honestly about the event, in a simple, age-appropriate manner
- Maintain regular home and school routines
- Help your child to relax (e.g., listening to music, deep breathing, positive self-talk)
- Talk to your child about how to manage his/her emotions effectively
- Limit exposure to graphic/sensational social media and media coverage
- Be patient. There is no correct timetable for healing. Some children recover quickly while others recover more slowly

**Many children, if given support, are resilient and can recover from the event over time. However, some children will require more help and support from family, educators, and mental health professionals. Please see the list of additional supports available on the back of this handout.**

Resources Consulted:

[The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators](#)  
[Childhood Trauma Reactions: A Guide for Teachers from Preschool to Year 12](#)

## SAMPLE: SUPPORTING CHILDREN AFTER A TRAUMATIC EVENT

Resources are available to help your child cope with difficult situations including school-based support, crisis services, and other community supports.

### School-Based Supports

Please contact your child's school directly to discuss the school-based supports that are available.

### Crisis Services

There may be a time when you and/or your child require(s) immediate support. Below are services that can help:

|                                                                     |                      |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Emergency Services                                                  | 911 (Emergency Line) |
| <a href="#">Durham Mental Health Services (Crisis Services)</a>     | 1-800-742-1890       |
| <a href="#">Lakeridge Health Emergency Department</a>               | 905-576-8711         |
| <a href="#">Distress Centre Durham</a>                              | 1-800-452-0688       |
| <a href="#">Kids Help Phone</a>                                     | 1-800-668-6868       |
| <a href="#">Ontario Shores Centre for Mental Health Crisis Line</a> | 1-800-263-2679       |

### Community Supports

To connect with available supports in your community, contact the services below:

|                                                                      |                |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| <a href="#">Central Intake</a>                                       | 1-888-454-6275 |
| <a href="#">Ontario 211: Community and Social Services Help Line</a> | 211            |

It is also recommended that you make an appointment with your child's health care provider(s) to discuss additional supports that may be available.

## SAMPLE: SUPPORTING ADOLESCENTS AFTER A TRAUMATIC EVENT

Adolescents react to a traumatic event in a variety of ways. It is common for adolescents to show some changes in behaviour and/or difficulties in managing their emotions following exposure to a traumatic event. These responses may occur soon after the event or may present long after the event.

Some reactions that you might observe in adolescents may include:

- Feelings of anxiety, fear, and worry about personal safety and the safety of others
- Repeated discussion of the event and a focus on specific details of what happened
- Difficulty with sleep (e.g., avoiding sleep, waking up in the night, nightmares)
- Increased physical complaints (e.g., headaches, stomach aches, chest pains)
- Changes in behaviour (e.g., appetite, agitation, angry outbursts, decreased attention, withdrawal, irritability)
- Over or under-reacting to stimuli (e.g., touch, lights, sudden movements, sounds)
- Difficulty with everyday routines
- Increased distress (e.g., crying, feeling down)
- Changes in school performance and attendance
- Heightened difficulty with authority, redirection, or criticism
- Unusually flat affect/emotion (e.g., absence of typical emotional response, quiet, withdrawn)
- Emotional numbing (e.g., seeming to have no feeling about the event)
- Discomfort with feelings (e.g., thoughts of revenge)
- Repetitive thoughts and comments about death or dying (e.g., internet searches, drawings, writing)
- Re-experiencing the trauma (e.g., memories of the event during the day)
- Avoidance behaviours (e.g., avoiding places associated with the event)
- Increase in impulsivity and risky behaviour (including substance abuse)
- A loss of confidence and/or trust in others

Here are some things you can do at home to help your adolescent:

- Consult a qualified mental health professional if you feel your adolescent requires additional support
- Assure your adolescent of his/her safety at home and at school
- Reassure your adolescent that he/she is not responsible for the event. Some adolescents may blame themselves for events, even those completely out of their control
- Allow your adolescent to express his/her fears verbally or through art/writing
- Provide an opportunity for your adolescent to talk about the event, in a safe, caring and supportive environment
- Speak to your adolescent honestly about the event, in an age-appropriate manner
- Maintain regular home and school routines
- Help your adolescent to relax (e.g., listening to music, deep breathing, positive self-talk)
- Talk to your adolescent about how to manage their emotions effectively
- Limit exposure to graphic/sensational social media and media coverage
- Be patient. There is no correct timetable for healing. Some adolescents recover quickly while others recover more slowly

**Many adolescents, if given support, are resilient and can recover from the event over time. However, some adolescents will require more help and support from family, educators, and mental health professionals. Please see the list of additional supports available on the back of this handout.**

Resources Consulted:

[The National Adolescent Traumatic Stress Network: Adolescent Trauma Toolkit for Educators](#)  
[Adolescenthood Trauma Reactions: A Guide for Teachers from Preschool to Year 12](#)

## SAMPLE: SUPPORTING ADOLESCENTS AFTER A TRAUMATIC EVENT

Resources are available to help your adolescent cope with difficult situations including school-based support, crisis services, and other community supports.

### School-Based Supports

Please contact your adolescent's school directly to discuss the school-based supports that are available.

### Crisis Services

There may be a time when you and/or your adolescent require(s) immediate support. Below are services that can help:

|                                                                     |                      |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Emergency Services                                                  | 911 (Emergency Line) |
| <a href="#">Durham Mental Health Services (Crisis Services)</a>     | 1-800-742-1890       |
| <a href="#">Lakeridge Health Emergency Department</a>               | 905-576-8711         |
| <a href="#">Distress Centre Durham</a>                              | 1-800-452-0688       |
| <a href="#">Kids Help Phone</a>                                     | 1-800-668-6868       |
| <a href="#">Ontario Shores Centre for Mental Health Crisis Line</a> | 1-800-263-2679       |

### Community Supports

To connect with available supports in your community, contact the services below:

|                                                                      |                |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| <a href="#">Central Intake</a>                                       | 1-888-454-6275 |
| <a href="#">Ontario 211: Community and Social Services Help Line</a> | 211            |

It is also recommended that you make an appointment with your adolescent's health care provider(s) to discuss additional supports that may be available.