Tips for Mobile County Teachers About Talking to Students About the Oil Spill Disaster

Suggestions for Teachers and School Administrators

Our teachers are experienced

in helping children through disasters like Katrina; however, the oil spill may be somewhat different. The impact of the oil spill may affect children in Mobile County in different ways. For some, their families may have been financially impacted, while others may be fine and not show any reactions, and in some cases their reactions may be similar to other traumatic or disturbing events they have experienced. Some young people can be frightened by the sight of heavy equipment, hundreds of workers and beach tar. Alabama's public health message will emphasize the toughness and resiliency of coastal people while encouraging people to ask for assistance when necessary. Mental health care is stigmatized among many; and suffering people may be afraid to ask for help. We anticipate three stages:

1. after the tourist season ends,
2. during the holidays and
3. just before the next tourist season seen in the spring.

Answer questions about the event honestly, but do not dwell on the details or allow the oil spill to dominate classroom time indefinitely. Reassure students that Alabama's public health officials are monitoring the quality of Mobile County's air, water and seafood. Allow students to express themselves through conversation and writing. Acknowledge that school performance may be affected and consider modifying lesson plans.

Knowing the signs that are common at different ages can help teachers and school administrators recognize problems and respond appropriately. Mobile County schools can play an important role by reinforcing normal routines and providing students and teachers with information on ways to cope with the stress of this disaster. Our goal is to get all children through the next nine months and back to a normal summer:

Preschool and Kindergarten

Students ages 3-5 may regress to an earlier behavioral stage, cling to a parent or teacher, or become attached to a place where they feel safe. Changes in eating and sleeping habits are also common. Reassurance is key for this age group. Maintain a normal classroom routine and encourage students to express their feelings through play and artwork. Respond to students' questions with simple and clear answers.

Elementary School

Students ages 6-11 may have some of the same reactions that younger children have. They also may withdraw from playgroups and friends, compete more for the attention of teachers, be unwilling to leave home, be less interested in schoolwork, become aggressive, have added conflict with peers or parents, or find it hard to concentrate. Physical reactions such as headaches or stomachaches are also common. These students will benefit from opportunities to express their emotions through play and artwork. Encourage students to participate in recreational activities. Schools should work to create as much stability and consistency as possible.

Middle and High School

Students ages 12-18 are likely to have physical complaints when under stress, and they may be less interested in schoolwork or other responsibilities that they previously handled. Although some students may compete vigorously for attention from teachers, they also may withdraw; resist authority; become disruptive or aggressive at home or in the classroom, which may manifest as bullying-type behavior; or begin to experiment with high-risk behaviors, such as alcohol or drug use.

Teachers

– Assume children have experienced some type of stress from the oil spill.

– Determine if students and their families have been affected by this disaster so that you are prepared for potential changes in classroom behavior.

– Familiarize yourself with resources offered by Project Rebound.

– Provide opportunities in the classroom to discuss the oil spill if many of your students have been impacted by the disaster, but don't take on the role of a therapist. If a student's behavior or symptoms seem extreme or persist, make a referral to the behavioral health professional assigned to the school.

– Consider engaging parent-teacher associations as a way to discuss the possible ramifications on student learning if the community has been hit hard by the oil spill.

– Offer ways for your students to help each other and the community, such as participating in Gulf Coast cleanup efforts or fundraisers, as a way to demonstrate pro-social behaviors.

– Seek or provide extra support for those students who may need additional help to keep up with schoolwork.

– Help students understand that it is normal to feel a range of emotions and reactions. Encourage students to express these feelings to adults who can help students understand the experience.

– Recognize that things may get worse until springtime. The healing and recovery can take months or even years.

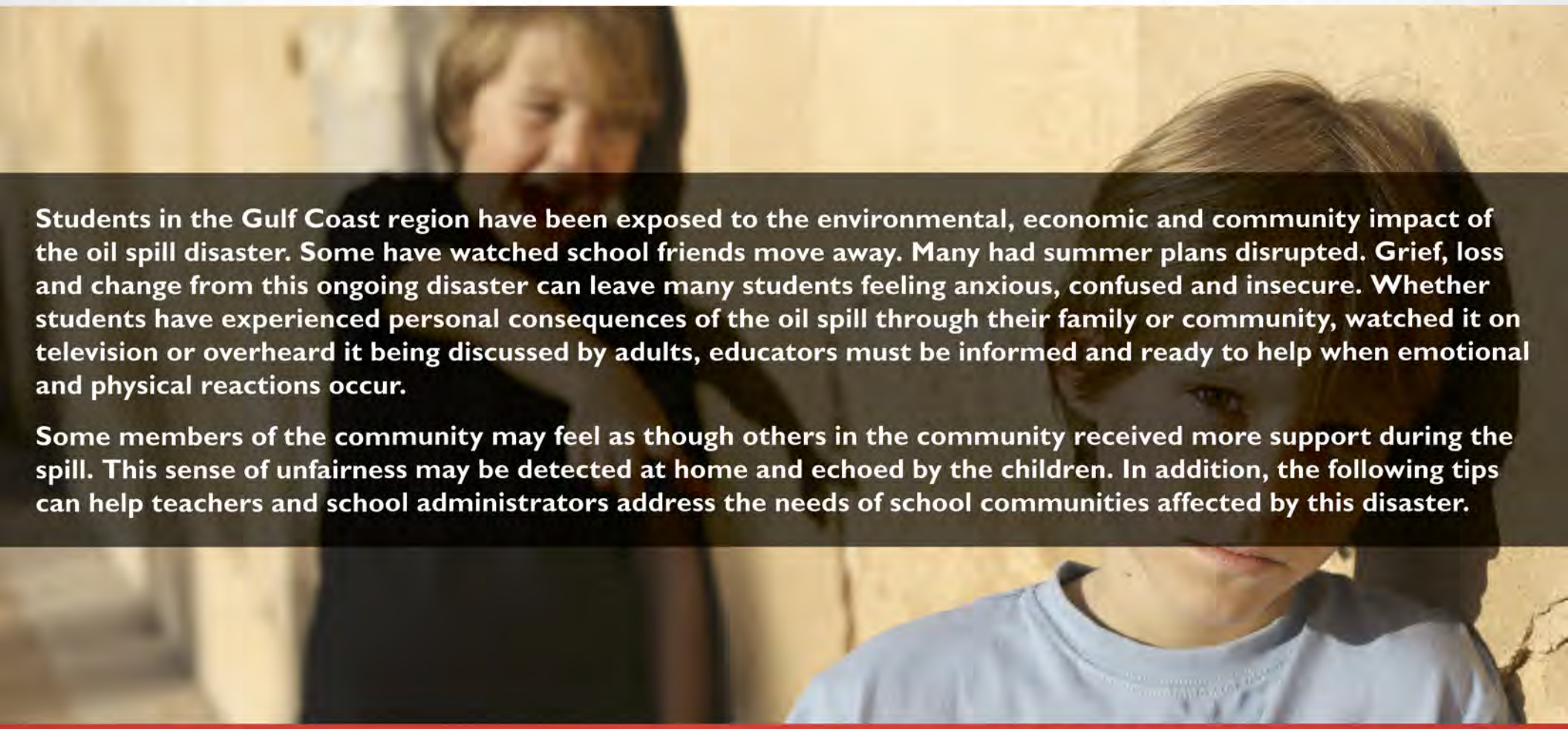
– Acknowledge the varying cultural differences of students and their coping practices.

– Incorporate age-appropriate art and play activities into your lesson plans, group discussions and presentations about the oil spill.

– Be careful not to label affected students as "troublemakers," "delinquents," or "slow learners." Trauma, loss and adversity can impact school performance and conduct. These disruptions can often be resolved with appropriate help.

– Inform school administrators if multiple students in your classroom are having problems so administrators are aware, engaged and able to assist.

– Acknowledge that you may also be affected by this disaster. Consider taking steps to promote your physical and emotional healing.



Students in the Gulf Coast region have been exposed to the environmental, economic and community impact of the oil spill disaster. Some have watched school friends move away. Many had summer plans disrupted. Grief, loss and change from this ongoing disaster can leave many students feeling anxious, confused and insecure. Whether students have experienced personal consequences of the oil spill through their family or community, watched it on television or overheard it being discussed by adults, educators must be informed and ready to help when emotional and physical reactions occur.

Some members of the community may feel as though others in the community received more support during the spill. This sense of unfairness may be detected at home and echoed by the children. In addition, the following tips can help teachers and school administrators address the needs of school communities affected by this disaster.

School Administrators

– Provide students, families and teachers with information on ways to cope with stress due to the oil spill.

– Remind teachers that mental health carries a stigma. Distressed parents may avoid essential services.

– Provide information or training to educators and staff on warning signs of serious crisis reactions.

– Link teachers to recovery staff assigned to the school.

– Encourage families experiencing difficulties to visit the resource center at Faulkner State Community College in Gulf Shores or call 1-800-639-REBOUND.

– Recognize that teachers may be affected by the oil spill and provide them with resources and opportunities to discuss, share and provide ongoing support with each other. Consider flexibility regarding sick leave policies as a way to acknowledge the possible impact of the spill.

– Orient teachers to behavioral health resources in the school and surrounding community. Make certain that a referral process has been established and understood.

– Ensure that teachers know when to make a referral for a student who has emotional or behavioral problems.

– Work with behavioral health service providers and partners to help ensure that a variety of services is available to students and staff.

– Have behavioral health professionals who are trained in brief interventions available at the school and make that known to students and their caregivers.

Project Rebound is a collaborative effort of state and local agencies to provide comprehensive behavioral health response to residents of Baldwin and Mobile counties who were impacted by the oil spill. Services include outreach, counseling, referral, public education, and resiliency building.

PROJECT REBOUND

1-800-639-REBOUND

Deaf or Hard of Hearing?

Please use the statewide relay system to contact Project Rebound: **711**

find us on the web @ www.mh.alabama.gov/projectrebound