

# 2010 Bushfire

## Psychosocial Recovery

### Child and Adolescent Mental Health

#### STRATEGIES FOR TEACHERS

Prior to the 1980s, mental health was mostly identified with mental illness. In more recent times it has been recognised that good mental health is not just the absence of illness but additionally, having the necessary skills to cope with life's adversities.

While families are the first source of support for a child or adolescent's mental health, schools are excellent places to promote good mental health. Teachers have an opportunity to observe the needs of children/adolescents and can reinforce natural mental health strengths and respond to children/adolescents that may have acute mental health problems.

#### *Promoting good mental health*

Good mental health practices involve promoting protective environments that can help children and adolescents engage in positive behaviours, academic learning, emotional wellbeing and social competence for their life journey.

#### *Strategies that promote good mental health environments include:*

##### **A sense of belonging**

Schools have an opportunity to extend a child/adolescent's sense of connectedness through interaction with the child/adolescent's parents. Children take cues from their parents and if there is a sense of trust between their teacher(s) and parents this can transfer to the child. Some ways of encouraging a sense of belonging include: greeting children/adolescents, meeting with parents, personal messages, sharing an important event with a child/adolescent, parent volunteer programs, and school community functions.

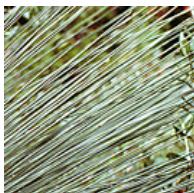
##### **Recognition**

All children and adolescents need recognition. Good mental health practices include praising a child who puts his/her hand up instead of calling out, is caring toward peers and shows self control when angry.

If a child/adolescent is misbehaving, try to acknowledge children who are behaving appropriately before addressing the child that is not. It can be positive to ask children/adolescents to do something to help, such as collecting the books and then praising them after they have completed the task. When talking to a child/adolescent about problem behaviour it is important to acknowledge feelings that underlie their actions.

##### **Making a difference**

Children and adolescents need to know they make a difference. Children and adolescents are keen to take on responsibilities such as the role of class monitor or creating a classroom bulletin board. Having a responsibility promotes pro-social behaviours, connectedness, builds self-esteem and provides the opportunity for recognition.



## **Resiliency**

To be a resilient person you need to feel good about yourself. Resiliency refers to the ability to 'bounce back' from an adverse situation, rework goals and continue with a renewed sense of your life journey.

Teachers can help children/adolescents develop resiliency by promoting the child/adolescent's ability to refocus and 'have another go' or find another way of achieving a particular goal. Children and adolescents need to believe that achieving something is a result of their own actions. Teachers can help children/adolescents define goals, help to identify strategies and resources, help them develop timelines and determine when they may need some assistance. It is appropriate for children/adolescents to seek help when they have exhausted their own capacity.

## **Addressing mental health problems**

Promoting good mental health by using strategies in the teaching and learning environment, such as those described, gives most children/adolescents the grounding they need to achieve good mental health. Additionally, there is a need to recognise and respond to child/adolescent acute mental health needs.

### **Schools can support child/adolescent mental health needs in the following ways:**

*Individual* – Working with parents and support staff to determine the most appropriate intervention(s) for child/adolescent mental health problems such as depression, grief, trauma and learning disabilities.

*Environment* – Creating a supportive and caring environment that fosters good mental health practices (connectedness, resiliency, self esteem, and respect for self and others).

*Teaching and Learning* – Embedding programs and practices into the curriculum that address specific issues and development of skills (social skills, personal responsibility, self determination, resiliency, coping skills, and problem solving).

General symptoms of mental health problems may include withdrawal, decline in academic functioning, erratic behaviour, change in usual behaviour, increased physical complaints and/or risk taking behaviour. It is important teachers discuss any noted behaviour changes with parents. Additionally, teachers may need to identify processes for working with support staff and providing information for making a referral to a mental health professional.

Not all changes in a child/adolescent's behaviour indicate a mental health problem and only a qualified mental health professional can make a thorough assessment of a child/adolescent's mental health. This requires familiarity with referral processes for accessing Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) or other professionals.

### **Information for school staff on referral processes**

Information for school staff on accessing support from allied health professionals, CAMHS, GPs and Community Health Centres is available by downloading the *Supporting Recovery for Children and Young People* resources available on the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's bushfire resources website at:

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/bushfires/support/schools.htm>

Some of this material was adapted from "Children's Mental Health: Strategies for Educators" National Association of School Psychologists, 2004.