

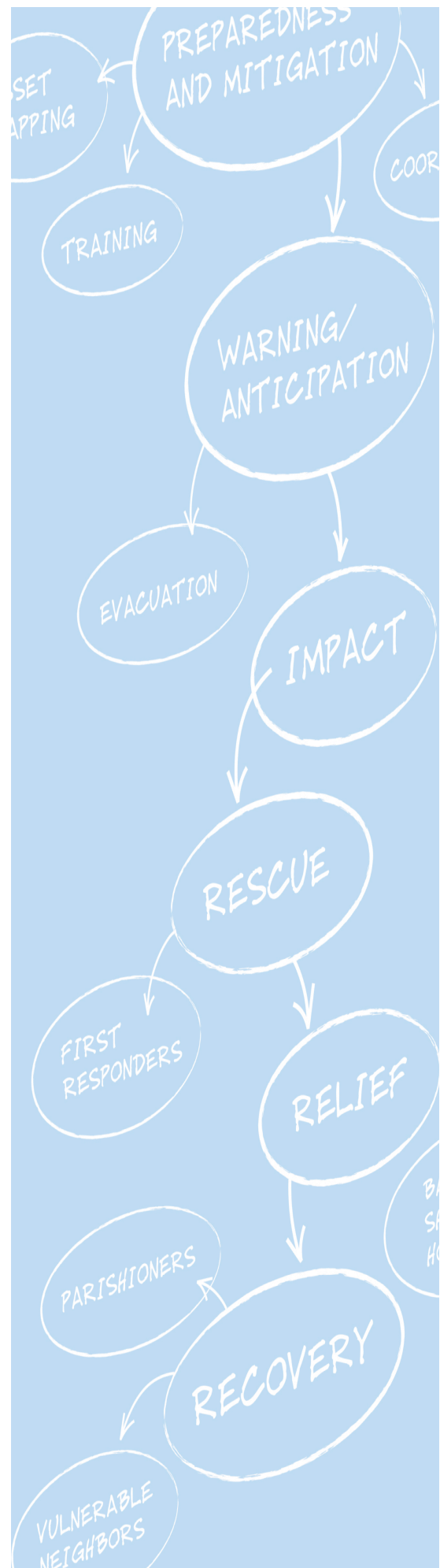


Episcopal  
Relief & Development

U.S. Disaster Program

# Ministering to Youth After a Disaster

## Resources for Grades 6-8



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## Introduction

If your congregation has just experienced a crisis or disaster – within the community, in the world, or even within the church itself – the church can serve as a place of listening and of grieving, but also of resilience as well. As you minister to young people immediately after a disaster, you can share these qualities of Christian hope and presence with them, including:

- A calm presence.
- A listening and attentive community where those affected may share their experiences, along with their grief and their pain and frustrations.
- A sense of resilience and hope for the future.

This resource contains a number of options you may use in ministering middle school-aged youth (grades 6-8) in the days immediately following a disaster, either in a regularly scheduled church school experience or in a specially designed event. These activities may also be used at other times. All are based on traditional Christian spiritual disciplines and are designed to assist youth in coping with the stress, confusion, sadness, and anger they may feel after a disaster has impacted their homes, their communities, or the world.

Choose the options that you feel comfortable using and that work with your group. Following are ideas for:

- Gathering, Checking In and Welcoming the Group
- Activities themed around Christ's Light in the Darkness
  - Opening Prayer
  - Candle Holder Art Activity and Follow Up Discussion
  - Service Ideas
  - Closing Prayer
- Additional Activities
  - Telling Our Stories
  - Shipwrecked: Roll Playing and Discussion
  - Opportunities for Expression and Reflection
  - Tools to Take Home

Additionally, the following handouts for parents and teachers are available at the end of this resource. Use these as part of your preparation for working with youth after a disaster. Make copies available to parents and teachers, as well.

- *Tips for Working With Children and Youth After A Disaster* (for distribution to teachers and others working with youth)
- *Tips for Parents in Helping Children and Youth Cope with Disaster* (for distribution to parents)
- *Tips on Praying with Children* (for teachers and parents)
- *Helpful Books for Children and Youth* (for teachers and parents)

# Gathering, Checking In, and Welcoming the Group

Time: 10-15 minutes

Materials:

- Small Table
- Large candle and matches
- Bible
- Nametags for all; participants can also make these as they arrive

## Gathering

After a disaster, our church can serve as a safe haven for those affected by the event. As you welcome your group to this time together, please emphasize these points:

- This is a safe place to share our fears, our sorrows, our anger, and even questions we might have about our faith. Church is a place where we bring our whole selves – doubts and all. Anger at God and faith crises are normal reactions after disasters.
- As members of this faith community, we ask you to listen attentively to each other. This is not a time to “fix” each other; this is a time to honor the honestly held thoughts and feelings arising as a result of this disaster.
- As with all small group discussions, we ask that all personal information stay within the group, not to be shared with others. We want this time together to be a safe place to share and listen.

## One Word Check-In

Ask each person to express one word or phrase describing how they feel today. Assure participants that there is not “right” or “wrong” way to feel, and they are also free to “take a pass.” Acknowledge each answer with a nod or gesture showing that the person has been heard and repeat each word or phrase expressed.

## Welcome

When all have arrived, invite participants to sit in a circle on the floor or on chairs arranged in a circle. Seat yourself as part of the circle. Place the table in front of you and place the candle and Bible on top of it. As you begin the introduction, light the candle. Use these words or your own to introduce the theme of Christ’s light in the darkness.

- Some of us may find that our lives are pretty upside down right now. It can be hard to get back to our typical routines and our familiar patterns. Familiar and comfortable would be really nice right now.
- That’s why in our darkest times we often gather at church and as a Church. Our faith family is all about familiar rituals and patterns. They are not only comforting and familiar when everything is a little crazy, but they remind us that God is with us in all the craziness. God’s love for us doesn’t change, even when the world around us does.

- God’s love and concern for us has fueled all the kindness and care and the help we’ve experienced this week. God’s love is like a light in the darkness, like the flashlights we use when the lights go out, or the candles we light. That’s why we always light candles in our worship services. They remind us that Christ’s light is with us, especially in our darkest times. And we can go into the world carrying that light to others, like lamps or candle holders for Christ’s light.
- I’ll bet that this week, some of God’s light has come from you, and has lit the way for others. And some of that light has come from others and has lit the way for you.
- Have any of you experienced some light this week – some care and help and comfort that lit the way for you? Did any of you find yourself in a position where they could be light for someone else? *Provide time for the participants to share. Add your own experiences as well. Especially mention times that young people were a light to you.*

## Opening Prayer

Introduction: During our time together we’re going to make some light, we’re going to spread some light and we’re going to be some light. But first let’s ask God to bless these special times of light that came to mind for us this week – to bless the people who were light for us, and the times we were light for others. And let’s ask God to make way for more moments of light in the time to come. This prayer is one of our collects, one of our Church’s great collection of prayers.

*Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; though Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen. (Book of Common Prayer, p. 213)*

Our Scriptures also remind us that people have gone through tough times before, and God has been with them. Here’s some particularly good advice that Jesus gave His followers. It’s from the Gospel of Matthew.

*Read Matthew 5:14-16*

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

The Word of the Lord

**All:** Thanks be to God

Lord of Light, help us to receive your light today and to bring it to others who are most in need of your Love. We pray in Jesus name:

**All:** Amen.

# Candle Holder Art Activity

Participants will cover a glass votive candle holder with tissue paper and glue. At the end of the session, provide a candle or battery operated tea light to go with it.

**Time: 15 minutes**

Supplies:

- A clear glass votive candle holder for each child.
- Various colors of tissue paper. You can either precut these in small squares or have the participants cut or tear their own paper. Smaller pieces will allow for more colors to be glued onto the votive holder.
- Cups of white glue diluted with a little water, so that it is about the consistency of thin paint.
- Paint brushes.
- Votive candles.

Directions: Paint the votive candle holder with the glue and stick the tissue pieces on. This can be done section by section. Then paint over the pieces with the glue to secure them. Allow them to dry for the rest of the time together.

Note: Have adult leaders and assistants sit among the young people as they work. Pay attention to what they are discussing. This may be an opportunity for some to talk about their experiences in an informal and non-threatening way. Listen to their stories, and for the most part, don't insert your own. You can provide some gentle correction or redirection if they are reporting news of the disaster that is distorted or disturbingly graphic. Note those who might be having a difficult time or who might need some emotional support. Do not try to fix things in the moment, but share any important observations with youth ministers or parents, so they can get the help they might need.

It's OK if a young person does not want to participate in the activity. You can send them home with instructions, a glass votive, a little bag of tissue pieces and a candle.

## Follow-up discussion points

- You made some beautiful candle holders that you can take home and share with your family.
- Light, even a little candle light, can be really comforting and beautiful, especially when it's night time, or even when it just seems dark.
- What are other times we use candles? (at church, at birthdays, in Advent....)
- The passage from Matthew that we read in our opening prayer said that we are called to be light to others so they can see Jesus among them. How can you bring Christ's light to the people around you this week?
- Reinforce that candles are to be lit by parents and only remain lit when an adult is in the room. They're not private candles but candles meant to share light with others.

## Service Activity Ideas

Invite the participants to practice being holders of Christ's light with a service activity. Participants may find it helpful to take some action to help their families, their community, or others affected by disaster. Taking action may aid them in feeling more confident and able to cope with the disaster. Simple actions might include:

- Drawing or decorating prayer cards to distribute to those affected by the disaster, showing that they are kept in prayer by your congregation. Please be mindful and respectful of the diverse faith traditions and beliefs of people who will receive your cards or gifts.
- Making a banner showing your support for your community.
- Collecting canned goods to resupply food pantries in your community.
- Collecting coins for donations to agencies supporting those affected by disaster in your community or elsewhere.
- Creating and delivering care packages of snacks and thank-you cards for relief workers, police and firefighters, or others who are working hard to help your community.
- Creating bags of small notebooks and crayons for children in your community directly affected by the disaster, so that they will be able to express their emotions and have something to do while parents cope with the aftermath of the disaster. Before starting this sort of project, make sure that the intended recipients have the capacity to receive it and distribute it, so they are not unduly burdened by the "gift."

Please note: Often one of the first responses of people who are responding to a disaster from a distance is to send goods, clothing and other items to the affected community. This is not recommended. It can actually be a tremendous burden on the community and those impacted by the crisis, as it can overwhelm the recipients' ability to store, use or disburse the items. And, the recipients may not need what is being sent. A better approach is to send checks or gift cards to reputable and credible organizations, which allow them to purchase what is needed.

# Telling Our Stories

After a disaster, inviting youth to simply tell their stories may be the best way you might offer spiritual and pastoral care to them. Those affected by disasters often find that telling their stories is helpful in both coping and recovering from the disaster. You might find the following tips useful in leading a session of listening and telling stories:

- Invite participation by proposing that they simply tell their stories and listen to each other. Set some boundaries. Suggest that each person who would like to share a story of where they were when the disaster struck and what they experienced limit their story to about 3 minutes or less. (If someone needs more time, they might schedule a time for counseling or pastoral care with clergy or other professionals.)
- If you have a large number of participants, consider dividing participants into smaller groups of three or four people for this activity. Also, consider using smaller groups if you feel your participants would be more comfortable speaking with a smaller number of people.
- Make sure time limits are honored. Tell your group – in advance – that if they begin to run over the limit, you will simply begin walking towards them as a cue that they will need to yield time to another participant. If you need to cut someone off, offer to speak with that person after the group session is over so that you might give others a chance to speak.
- Do not force or “call on” participants. Only invite stories from those who wish to participate.
- Practice active listening. Make eye contact as you listen, and nod or use others gestures to indicate that you have heard what each person has said.
- Thank each person for speaking. Don’t try to “fix” or address every problem or theological concern. This is a time for story-telling only. (If theological concerns arise, you might plan formation sessions in the future based on these concerns.)
- End the session with prayer for each person present, along with those mentioned in stories participants have shared.



# Closing Prayer: Christ Be Our Light

Time: 10-15 minutes

Materials:

- Votive candle holders that the participants made
- Additional candles
- A Bible
- A table

Arrange all the candle holders on a table. You can either place a few lit pillar candles among them, or place votives in the holders and light them all.

## Introduction:

We have spent our time together today in the Light of Christ. It's a light that finds us, that guides us and that shines through us. We are like the beautiful candle holders that you have made. We rely on Christ's light especially in dark and crazy times – in fact that's often when we see it best. And we can help spread Christ's light by what we do and what we say to others who are hurting. So we'll begin our prayer time with a prayer that comes from the church's *compline* service, also called night prayer. It's prayed in the darkness of the night.

Let us pray:

Be our light in darkness, O Lord, and in your great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night; for the love of your only Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. (Book of Common Prayer, p. 133)

All: Amen

## Scripture

Read (or invite a student to read) John 1: 1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

## Intercessions

*Invite participants to name people and situations that they would like the comfort and healing of Christ's light to touch this week.*

Respond with: Christ Be our Light.

## The Lord's Prayer

Introduction: When things are confusing or beyond our control we can reach for one of those familiar prayers that we use all the time. A great one is the Lord's Prayer. Let us pray ...

## Closing Song

*This Little Light of Mine or We are Marching in the Light of God*

## **Additional Activities:**

### **Shipwrecked – Role Playing and Discussion**

This Bible study may be used to give your group an opportunity to reflect on how disaster is part of the human experience and how people of faith have responded to disaster in our faith tradition. You may read this scripture, ask group participants to take turns reading this passage, or you may tell this story in your own words.

#### ***Shipwrecked – Acts of the Apostles 27:1 – 28:10***

In this story, the apostle Paul is being transferred as a prisoner of the Romans when he is shipwrecked and stranded on the Mediterranean island of Malta. After everyone is familiar with the story, hand each young person a slip of paper or index card showing the name of one of the following “characters” in this story:

- A Roman guard - assigned to keep order among the prisoners in their care.
  - A Roman centurion - is able to make sound decisions in the face of disaster.
- The apostle Paul - remains prayerful through it all and also finds the time to attend to the ministry of healing once he lands on Malta.
- A Prisoner on the ship - at the mercy of the Roman guards and could be thrown off the ship to save others.
- A native of Malta - unexpectedly find the shipwrecked group on their shores, first welcoming them, then fearing them. Later, the shipwrecked prisoners are treated as honored guests and assisted with supplies for the remainder of the journey.

Ask youth how they would react if they were the person written on their slip of paper – and why. If time allows, the group might act out the scripture passage or write a modern interpretation of this story. How would these characters act and react if they were in this situation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? For a simplified discussion starter, participants might be asked which character or characters they most identify with in this story and why.

#### **Additional Discussion Questions:**

- Where do we find God in this situation?
- When have you felt “tossed out of the boat” and struggling to survive – spiritually, emotionally, or physically?
- What can we learn from this story?

How can you find hope and resilience in your faith to face difficulties now?

## Opportunities for Reflection & Expression:

In coping with a recent disaster, youth may need both a means of expressing their thoughts and feelings and a time of quiet to put the stress of the disaster aside for at least a few minutes each day. As “take home tools” for coping with the disaster, you might offer your participants these time-honored techniques of spending quiet time with God. If time allows, you might give participants both the time and space to actually practice these spiritual disciplines.

- ***Lectio Divina*** – read a short passage of scripture. Ask participants to choose one word or phrase that stands out for them and to keep that word or phrase in mind. You might also go around the circle and ask participants to voice what word or phrase stands out for them. You may read the passage additional times, followed by silence or discussion of what God might be saying to each participant. For a more personal experience, participants might simply hold the word or phrase in mind as they keep the silence.
- **Journaling** – Make blank sheets of paper and pens available for free journaling. Ask participants to simply write whatever comes to mind or whatever they discern God might be saying to them at this time or in response to a comforting passage of scripture you might read to them. Responses may be shared or kept for personal discernment only.
- **Art Response** – Providing blank paper and a variety of markers or crayons, ask participants to draw or write one word or phrase that expresses what God might be saying to them at this time. Participants may also use colors, sketches, or simply free art expression to express their feelings about the word or phrase they have chosen. Participants may either share their work with the group or take it home for personal reflection and discernment.
- **Walking** – If your facility has access to a labyrinth, participants might be offered time to walk quietly in this space. If your facility has a garden, walking trail, or other outdoor space, participants might be offered time to simply have a quiet walk while communing with God’s creation and listening to what God might say to them through these images.
- **Music** – you might play a soft, quiet hymn in the background of this time of breathing and silence. Ask participants to listen to the words of the hymn and perhaps choose one word or phrase from the hymn that speaks to them.
- **Spiritual Reading** – You might offer participants a few moments to read a devotional or other spiritual reading. Supply several books of devotionals written for youth from which participants may choose.
- **Quiet Activities** – At home, participants might take a few minutes each day to sit and do some other quiet and fairly repetitive work – running or exercise, crafts, or cooking – to quiet the mind and listen to God.

## Prayer Pairs

In our Christian communities, prayer is a primary response to our fears, sorrows, and challenges. Opportunity for personal prayer concerns may be very comforting to those in your congregation. If you feel your group would be comfortable praying in small groups or in pairs, ask participants to form small groups of two or three and share any prayer concerns they might have. Remind participants that any prayer concerns should stay within the group and should not be shared with others. Also, participants may feel free to “take a pass” if they do not wish to share. Ask each small group to pray with and for each other.

If your group is new to this type of prayer, remind participants that they should listen attentively to each other, making eye contact and nodding or making other gestures of acknowledgement. They should not try to “fix” those making prayer requests or try to solve problems at this time. Instead, they should simply listen to each other and offer up prayers for each other.

Please encourage prayer partners to continue to pray for each other and to check in with each other by text, email, or phone at least once during the next week.

At the end of this time, please gather everyone together in one large group. Ask someone from each small group to share with the entire group one sentence that sums up their prayer requests. Please be attentive for any situations or special concerns you may need to follow up with individually or share with parents or clergy.

## Tools to Take Home

Spiritual Disciplines introduced in this resource are for use out in the world! Before your group ends its time together, please emphasize that activities youth have done during their time together may easily be done wherever they may find themselves. Disciplines such as Centering Prayer may be done unobtrusively and privately at home or even during a few minutes of break time during school, at work, or during extracurricular activities. Other calming activities, such as journaling or devotional reading, can also be done at home or in other venues when a young person needs a few minutes of quiet reflection and expression.

You might ask young people to reflect on these questions:

- What activity did you do during this time together that helped you feel calm and peaceful?
- When is another time that you could do this activity again?
- What would help the next time you feel sad, scared, or stressed?
- Who could you check in with for support during the next week or month?

## Tips for Working with Children and Youth after a Disaster

If you are teaching children or youth soon after a disaster, your main mission is to comfort, listen, and point them towards a path of resilience. Familiar relationships with kind, consistent adults are very important for young people coping with a disaster. Familiarize yourself with these tips as you prepare to respond to children in the weeks after a disaster or trauma.

- Listen and share a sense of compassion, and serve as a calm presence.
- Don't try to "fix" problems; just try to help children find a place of serenity and security.
- Allow children to express their thoughts and feelings about the disaster, but don't force them to do so.
- Using simple materials of plain paper and markers or crayons, allow children time to freely draw or write their thoughts and feelings.
- Allow parents to accompany their children in this class if they are feeling insecure. Also appreciate that parents may need their own time to process their thoughts and feelings with other adults.
- Try to set a tone of hope in your time with the children. A sense of hope at this time will help children in finding resilience.
- It is common in times of sorrow for children (and adults) to express anger at God or doubt in their faith. Children might be comforted in knowing that these reactions are indeed typical. Again, don't try to talk children out of these reactions; just give them a safe space in which they may express themselves at this time and reassure them that they are not alone.
- If possible, ask adults with good pastoral care skills, trauma specialists or who have training in mental health services to attend group meetings with children. Emotions of sadness, fear, and grief may be expressed by the children during your time together. Adults with good pastoral care skills may be helpful in speaking with children about these emotions. Make sure that any adults working with children have the appropriate background checks and have attended Safeguarding God's Children trainings.
- If you are able, you might lead children in taking an action to help their community or others. Such an activity can help children feel more confident and able to cope with the disaster.

(More on next page)

## **Tips for Working with Children/Youth, continued.**

### **Typical Reactions to Trauma by Age Group**

Caregivers can provide much-needed comfort and security to children and youth affected by trauma. Many of their reactions will stem from the event, their history of crisis, their age and developmental stage, their support system and their perception of the event. Below is an outline of typical responses by age group.

#### **Preschool children**

**Reactions:** Shorter attention spans, confusion, loss of appetite, overeating, bowel/bladder problems, sleeping disturbance, nervousness, anxiety, fearful reminders, clinging, disobedience, thumb sucking, bedwetting, re-enacting trauma.

**Need:** To establish safety and security and self-control.

**Response:** Provide physical comforts, assure and provide adult protection, let the child sleep where he/she feels safe, clarify the event as well as misconceptions and misunderstandings and, most importantly, stay calm.

**Time:** Caregivers providing psychological first aid to pre-school/kindergarten age children should not spend more than 15 to 20 minutes at a time working with the child.

#### **Elementary school children**

**Reactions:** Confusion, inability to concentrate, headaches, stomachaches, vision problems, itching, sleep disturbances.

**Need:** To relieve guilt, to reestablish productivity, to feel safe and to build self-esteem.

**Response:** Encourage children to talk about their feelings, validate their reactions, reinforce age-appropriate behavior, provide structure, clarify misconceptions and provide opportunities for the child to succeed and feel good.

**Time:** Crisis response strategies should not take longer than 30 minutes to an hour for each session.

#### **Junior/Senior high youth**

**Reactions:** Problems concentrating, headaches, skin rashes, loss of appetite, depression, anxiety, withdrawal, antisocial behavior, drug or alcohol abuse, survivor guilt.

**Need:** To be reassured about normalcy, to understand direction in life and meaning of event, to receive help with stress reduction, to prepare for additional reactions, to clarify information

**Response:** Encourage discussion, validate reactions, provide opportunity for positive action, provide guidance and future contact, provide opportunity to conceptualize the incident and reactions to situations.

Sources: *School Crisis Management*, Kendall Johnson, Ph.D., Hunter House, 1993.  
Jayne Crisp, Association of Traumatic Stress Specialists, National Organization for Victim Assistance.

## **Tips for Parents in Helping Children and Youth Cope with Disaster**

These are tips for talking with young people in your family about disasters and helping children to find resilience in overcoming stressful events in their communities and in the world. Although in the short term, children may show signs of stress, young people often are able to find resilience in responding to disaster situations when they are well supported.

- Be honest. Do not sugar-coat a situation or tell a child “everything will be fine” unless you can realistically say this. Give your child age-appropriate information about what has happened without overdramatizing the situation. Even the youngest verbal children need a simple explanation so they do not imagine or envision things that are even worse than they are.
- Reassurance is key! Tell your child often that you will do everything you can to keep him or her safe. Keep all promises you make to your child during the crisis. In other words, do not make promises you cannot keep. It is important that your child can count on you when all else is in chaos.
- It’s okay to tell your child that you don’t have all the answers to his or her questions. Validate their thoughtful questioning. Be honest and accurate about the facts before giving answers to specific questions.
- One of the most important needs after a trauma is to talk about the event—often. It may be difficult for you to hear about, or you may tire of hearing the same story, but talking is a crucial part of recovery. Silence can make children feel isolated, and may convey the message that they should limit their grieving.
- Be supportive and sympathetic, but avoid overreacting. Don’t try to make it okay; let them express fears, thoughts, and worries. Sharing can be very healing for everyone. At the same time, don’t force them to share; let it come naturally.
- Allow the child to express all the emotions he or she is feeling. Children need to know that their feelings are normal grief feelings even though they might not be normal feelings under other circumstances. If feelings such as anger or guilt persist for many months, professional help might be necessary to help them resolve those feelings.
- Practice patience. Children who have experienced disaster-related stress often regress in their development. Small children may even regress in their potty training. Outbursts or tantrums may occur. These are typical reactions. Be understanding and stay calm.
- Encourage teens and older children to check in with their friends. Social interaction with friends will help teens find comfort and stay connected with their peer group. Give liberty to teenagers around how they make themselves feel better, i.e. turning the stereo on loud, talking on the phone more than usual to their friends. Allow them privacy (both in physical space and to deal with their feelings) if they need it.

## Tips for Parents, Continued

- Spend time with your child. Hold and hug your child. Tell your child how much you love him or her and that you will get through this situation together. Perform small acts of kindness and generosity.
- Encourage expression. Drawing a picture, telling a story, or acting out a drama or engaging in creative play may assist your child in emotionally coping with the disaster. Don't be judgmental of these expressions. Try to respond by asking the child to tell you about the picture or other artistic expression, and listen attentively. Encourage teens to write in journals, draw, or play music to express their emotions.
- Turn off the television news to prevent overload of disturbing images. Also, monitor your child's conversations with other children and be prepared to gently correct misinformation.
- You likely will need time to process and cope with the disaster yourself. If you can safely do so, allow another adult to care for your child while you give yourself time to seek support from others or even attend to clean-up or paperwork resulting from the disaster. Consider swapping out babysitting duties with friends or neighbors.
- Try to follow typical routines and daily schedules as much as you are able, in order to give your child a sense of familiarity and security.
- Pray. Pray with your children. Pray for your children. Practice your faith and model resilience in the face of hardship.
- Address death concretely and factually. Death in a child's life is inevitable and means different things to children at different ages. Young children (ages 1-5) grieve for the threat to their security, while children six years of age and older grieve more for the actual loss.
- If bereaved children indicate in any way that they want help or counseling, get it for them immediately. Most children are hesitant to ask openly for formal counseling, so if this happens, consider it a blatant cry for help.
- Don't expect your child to take care of your fears, i.e. don't keep your child home from school because you are afraid to be separated from him or her. Find help to cope with your fears.
- Review family safety procedures. If your family doesn't have safety procedures for fire, storms, etc., take this time to establish new ones and get everyone involved in the process. Check out the following website to help your family make a safety plan: [www.ready.gov/make-a-plan](http://www.ready.gov/make-a-plan).

Source: Includes material compiled by Jayne Crisp, CTS, CVAS. Association of Traumatic Stress Specialists.



# **Tips for Praying with Children and Youth**

## **Prayer in the Faith Formation Setting**

Prayer is a familiar and essential part of the faith formation experience. Group prayer allows children to voice and share their concerns with a supportive community. And practices such as centering prayer are calming techniques that children can use on their own in stressful situations. The following are tips for using prayer sensitively in the religious education classroom or group setting.

### **Welcoming Prayer Requests**

Please allow sufficient time for all in your group to make prayer requests if they wish. This is not a time to rush, but a time of quiet presence with God and with each other.

- Ask participants to sit in a circle (if they are not doing so already), preferably on the floor, where everyone can see each other. This method usually reduces excessive squirming or talking and promotes a reverent tone within the group.
- Adult leaders should sit within the circle on the same level as the children.
- Serenity on the part of the adult leaders is key! If adult leaders are calm and prayerful, children will take their cues from these leaders as examples for their own behavior.
- Be aware that you might hear some fairly serious prayer requests, as well as many more typical requests concerning pets and family members. Please acknowledge each request in a respectful manner, taking each child's prayer request seriously. Reply by praying for the person or pet named. For example, you might nod and say, "we pray for Jack's dog Max."
- If you hear of a very serious concern, such as something that affects a participant's health, safety or wellbeing, mention it to the appropriate pastoral staff person or youth leader, so that they can follow up. Otherwise, please keep the prayer request confidential. The purpose of this prayer circle is to provide a safe place where youth might offer their most heartfelt prayers to God. Also, don't try to "fix" problems at this time. You will best minister to youth at this time by simply listening and validating their fears and concerns.
- If participants express doubts or anger towards God, know that this can be a common reaction to loss, sorrow, or disaster. Again, your ministry at this time is to simply listen. You might reply by saying, "sometimes we do feel anger at God or wonder where God is. This is common after something bad happens."
- Close with a prayer that includes the participants' requests. Pray for each youth as well.

## Centering Prayer Techniques

Centering Prayer is a silent, meditative prayer form that focuses on placing oneself in the presence of God. The following Centering Prayer techniques may be used with children or teens who experience stress in a post-disaster situation. They can be used both within Christian formation classes and at home or school. The goal of teaching these techniques is to give children tools for prayerfully coping with stress and finding a sense of calm and serenity.

The time for this activity should be about **one minute**. Try only thirty seconds for early elementary-age children or for those who are new to silent prayer. Older children might be able to maintain up to three minutes of prayerful silence.

Please be aware that if a disaster has struck recently, young people may express emotions of sadness, grief, or even fear during or after this time. This is common. If possible, ask adults with good pastoral care skills, who know the participants and have worked with them previously to attend your group time and be available to assist with anyone who might need extra attention.

### Tips for leading youth in Centering Prayer:

- Ask participants to make a circle on the floor, either by sitting or by forming a circle with chairs. The adult leaders should take positions within this circle as equal co-participants.
- Participants should be asked to sit up straight, with shoulders relaxed, and feet on the floor (or crossed in front of them if they are sitting on the floor).
- Invite them to close their eyes OR choose a specific point to focus on. You might light a candle or place a religious-themed picture or photograph or cross in the center of the circle upon which children might focus.
- Explain that this is a time for them to simply be with God. Ask them to listen to God in silence.
- Ask participants to take deep breaths, filling up their lower bellies first, then their rib cages, and finally their upper chests. Exhale slowly.
- Ask participants to see how long they go without talking or squirming. You might use a chime, bell, or other sound to indicate the time to start and end this time of quiet.
- Model calm, serene behavior during this exercise. You will likely find that if you are very calm during this time, participants will be calm as well. Let a second adult keep watch for any disruptive behavior and deal with any problems. This second adult might also serve as a timekeeper.

### **Sharing Time after Centering Prayer:**

- When the quiet time has concluded, ask participants to open their eyes. Ask, “what did you experience?” or even “what did you hear?” Young people often have profound spiritual experiences of hearing God in these times of silence. Take their comments seriously! Acknowledge each one’s experiences by thanking them for sharing their experiences with you.
- Suggest that when they feel sad, stressed, confused, or overwhelmed, they might try taking a few moments of Quiet Time at home, at school, or while playing.
- As with any small group, please keep these shared thoughts within the group. Don’t try to “fix” problems; just listen attentively. If you feel someone needs special attention as a result of thoughts or feelings expressed during this time, please consult your pastoral staff or youth leader.
- End your quiet time together with a prayer for each participant, including their prayer concerns. A familiar song or hymn might also be sung.

## Helpful Books for Children and Youths

*Blackout* by Anne Rockwell. Grades K-3. In this story, a family works together to weather a power blackout.

*Carolina Hurricane* by Marian Rumsey. Stranded on an island off the Carolina coast, a boy and his dog struggle to survive the fury of a hurricane.

*Earthquake* by Matt Christopher. Grades 4-6. A boy and his horse experience an earthquake.

*Downwind* by Louise Moeri. Grades 4-8. An accident at a nuclear power plant forces a family to face their fears and each other's.

*Euphonia and the Flood* by Mary Calhoun. Grades K-3. Euphonia puts her motto, "If a thing is worth doing, it's worth doing well" to the test as she and her pig ride through a flood, rescuing animals whether they want rescuing or not.

*A Horse Came Running* by Meindert DeJong. Grades 4-6. The story of a boy who was home alone when a tornado came, and the challenges he faced in coping with both the storm and its aftermath.

*Little Toot on the Mississippi* by Hardy Gramatky. Grades Pre K – 3. Little Toot becomes a hero as he rescues animals on the flooded bayou.

*Michael* by Liesel Skorpan. Grades K-3. Michael's concern for a baby rabbit left outside in a thunderstorm helps him overcome his fear of storms.

*Sometimes I'm Afraid* by The Menninger Clinic. Grades Pre K-1. Early childhood fears are identified and normalized in gentle text and pictures.

*Teetoncey and Ben O'Neal* by Theodore Taylor. Grades 5-7. After a shipwreck along the Outer Banks, a young girl works through her fears.

*The Big Rain* by Francoise Seignobose. Grades Pre K-4. A girl has to help move her family's belongings and make sure her grandmother is safe when a flood threatens her town.

*The Big Wave* by Pearl S. Buck. Grades 3-6. A child is the sole survivor after a tidal wave sweeps away his village.

*The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* by Judy Viorst. Grades Pre K-2. Barney the cat dies. In the process of holding his funeral, his owners face their feelings and sadness and loss.

*The Terrible Wave* by Morden Dahlstedt. Grades 5-9. One girl's experience during the Johnstown, Pennsylvania flood.

*Trapped in Slickrock Canyon* by Gloria Skurzynski. Grades 5-9. An exciting and very human story of cousins who are caught on a trail by a flash flood.

Source: *Disaster Spiritual Care: Practical Clergy Responses to Community, Region and National Tragedy* edited by Rabbi Stephen B. Roberts, BCJC and Rev. Willard W.C. Ashley Sr., DMIN, DH, 2008. Permission granted by SkyLight Paths Publishing, Woodstock, VT, [www.skylightpaths.com](http://www.skylightpaths.com).

## Additional books for younger children

*The Tree that Survived the Winter*, by Mary Fahy, Paulist Press. 1989. (All ages through adult)

*Take Time to Relax!* by Nancy Carlson, Puffin Books, 1991. ISBN # 0-14-054242-6. Ask for soft cover edition.

*The Knight Who Was Afraid of the Dark* by Barbara Shook Hazen, Dial Books for Young Readers. ISBN: 0-8037-0667-7. Ask for soft cover.

*There's Something in My Attic* by Mercer Mayer, Dial Books for Young Readers. ISBN # 0-8037-0414-3. Ask for soft cover edition.

*There's a Nightmare in My Closet* by Mercer Mayer, Dial Books for Young Readers. ISBN #. 0-8037-8574-7.

*I Hear a Noise* by Diane Goode, Dutton Children's Books (Puffin Unicorn Book), NY. 1988. ISBN # 0-525-44884-5.

*When Someone Very Special Dies* by Marge Heegaard. Woodland Press, 1988, ISBN#0-96-20502-0-2.

*When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death* by Laurie Krasny Brown and Mark Brown, Little Brown and Company, 1996.

*The Fall of Freddie the Leaf: A Story for All Ages* by Leo Buscaglia, Ph.D. 1982. SLACK Inc. ISBN# 0-943432-89-8, or Henry Holt and Co. ISBN 0-8050-1064-5.

*Sunshine: More Meditations for Children* by Maureen Garth, Collins Dove, 1994. ISBN 1-86371-406-5.

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