

# Psychological First Aid: How to Help Students Recover After a Personal, Community, or School-Based Emergency

READINESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is a concept that can be traced to an article published by the American Psychiatric Association in 1954 recognizing the benefits of early crisis interventions that relieve stress and human suffering. Following the events of Newtown, CT, the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigations, and Homeland Security, led by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, have supported the idea that brief and focused intervention can help students and educators in schools recover from the emergency incidents they may encounter. Models of PFA include the following:

- **Psychological First Aid for Schools:** trains teachers and other staff as a critical link in promoting resilience, in recognizing the signs of traumatic stress, and in helping students and their families regain a sense of normalcy after disasters and acts of mass violence
- **PFA: Listen, Protect, Connect — Model and Teach:** described in this publication
- **PFA-TEACH:** created for everyday problems experienced by students that interfere with learning and attendance.

This fact sheet explores the goals of PFA models; outlines when and how schools can implement PFA, including considerations to keep in mind when implementing; and describes the type of training school staff need to use this strategy effectively.

## Listen, Protect, Connect: An Evidence-Informed Model

“Psychological First Aid for Students and Teachers: Listen, Protect, Connect — Model & Teach,” (hereafter, LPC — Model & Teach) is a five-step crisis response strategy designed to reduce the initial distress of students or adults and to help students return to school, stay in school, and resume their learning. It is not a ‘one and done’ single session recital of events but a set of steps that can guide the interactions of students and educators over time through the process of recovering from an individual, group, or schoolwide community crisis event. For example, over time, students may wish to tell their stories many times in different settings (individually, in a small group, or after significant events that remind them of loss, trauma, or the anniversary of the tragedy). They may have delayed reactions, not wanting initially to tell their story depending on the individual student level, or stress or fear. Teachers, counselors, and other adults can apply these guiding principles in a flexible manner, acknowledging the student’s need for a safe place and trusting relationship to share their experience with trauma.

The two main goals of PFA for students and teachers are to

- Stabilize the emotions and behaviors of students; and

- Return students to an improved mental and emotional state after a crisis or disaster ready to attend school and reengage in classroom learning.

These goals promote the focus of teachers' actions on fulfilling the mission of education.

## How to Implement PFA for Students and Teachers

**LPC — Model & Teach** is a five-step program that gives educators guidelines on how to speak with students who have experienced a crisis or disaster. The five steps are based on a model of cognitive learning that helps students put their experiences and feelings into words, provides adult support and encouragement, engages students in practical problem solving, models calm and optimistic behavior, and teaches students about how traumatic stress affects human behavior and emotional reactions.

### Step 1: Listen

During step one, teachers or adult school staff should provide students with an opportunity to share their experiences and express feelings of worry, anxiety, fear, or other concerns about their safety. The LPC — Model & Teach strategy is a flexible approach that allows educators wide latitude to speak with students individually or in small formal or informal groups. Speaking with students can occur one-on-one if a teacher and student find themselves in a relatively private place to talk. Listening can also occur in a small group setting led by school-based crisis counselors, school psychologists, or social workers. The teacher can open the discussion by acknowledging what has happened, encouraging students to share their experiences, and establishing that the school is a safe place to do this. The teacher can begin the discussion with one of the samples Listening is a step that continues throughout the PFA process. Adults should respond to students' self-expression, conveying interest and empathy and responding with support to both verbal and nonverbal cues.

Adults can acknowledge the difficulty students may be having but should avoid making judgments and predictions, such as "You'll get over it" or "Only

### Sample "Listen" Questions

- Where were you when this crisis happened?
- What do you remember about that day?

the strong survive." It is important to validate the students' life experiences. Another caveat to educators during this phase is not to probe students for more details than they are willing to share, but to respect students' wishes not to share thoughts or feelings. Forcing students to go over their experiences in too much detail, especially immediately after the crisis, can re-traumatize the student and may cause more emotional and psychological distress to themselves and to others who may hear additional details about the event.

Teachers and other school personnel may worry about saying or doing the wrong thing but being available as an active and supportive listener, reflecting back students' concerns, and being open to discussion will serve as examples to students of how adults deal with difficult situations. Knowing they have a place where adults care and listen will increase the students' perception that school is a safe place and will facilitate their return to the learning environment of the classroom.

### Step 2: Protect

For this second step in the LPC — Model & Teach intervention, adults should focus on reestablishing students' feelings of both physical and emotional safety. They can honestly inform students about



events surrounding the crisis, such as sharing with them information about extra efforts in the community and school to keep everyone safe. This information should be provided in a developmentally and age-appropriate manner.

In the classroom, or around school, adults should maintain structure, stability, and predictability, and make efforts to reestablish routines, expectations, and rules. For example, bell schedules should return to normal as soon as possible. If shortened days are required, keep them to a minimum. Traumatized students may experience more confusion when disruption comes to their daily school routines, including after-school activities, by changes to their regular schedules.

Frequently, a child's paramount concern is separation from parents or caregivers. Parents can help stabilize children's reactions at home by resuming mealtime, homework, bedtime, and school readiness routines, as well as community or religious activities disrupted by the crisis or emergency.

It is also important at this phase to protect students from further physical harm or psychological trauma. Adults should try to keep the environment free of anything that could re-traumatize students, such as showing videos of similar tragedies or exposing students to television, podcasts, or news stories that have repeated reminders of the crisis or disaster, particularly for younger students.

## Sample "Protect" Questions

Use these questions to help elicit what the students' fears or worries are about after a disaster:

- What is the most difficult thing to deal with right now?
- Are you worried about how you are reacting?
- Are you worried about your safety? Around other students? Around adults at school or outside of school?

Adults also should be on the lookout for negative or trauma-related behaviors, which can include repetitive play or talk involving aspects of the traumatic event being proliferated in the classroom or around school. Other behaviors may include increased irritability, oppositional and defiant behaviors, withdrawal, poor attention and concentration, and difficulty learning new material. While some students may become the target of bullying, be aware that other students may become the bullies.

Despite the adults' assumption that students in distress may seek and receive support from peers, some students will use the tragedy as fodder for bullying. Although students will need extra patience and attention after a crisis, schools can increase students'



sense of safety and security by reestablishing rules and routines regarding appropriate behavior, including disciplinary consequences.

Above all, adults should support students' fears and worries respectfully and with discretion. For example, it would be inappropriate to announce to the class that "Jimmy is having a hard time getting his work done in the classroom and needs to leave class to go to the counselor because he can't stop thinking about the crisis." Or "Jimmy is not going to the class play tonight because he is afraid of the dark since the crisis occurred." Adults should find ways instead to help students get the support they need in a manner that preserves their dignity and privacy.

### Step 3: Connect

One of the most common reactions to trauma or fear is emotional and social isolation and the sense of loss of social supports. It can occur automatically, without students or adults realizing that they are withdrawing from their teachers or peers. The third objective of LPC — Model & Teach is to help students reestablish their normal social relationships. Restoring connections in the school promotes stability, recovery, and predictability in students' lives. Other community anchors include preexisting faith and cultural supports and/or supervised activities and organizations such as the scouts or boys' and girls' clubs.

Teachers or other school staff who reach out and check in with students on a regular basis help with



### Sample "Connect" Questions

These questions are not meant to be intrusive or probing but are gentle inquiries as to what others can do to help the student return to school, stay in school, and do well in school.

- What can I do to help you right now?
- What can your teachers do to help?
- What can your friends do to help?
- What can your family do to help?

connecting. In the classroom or athletic field, students also can be encouraged to interact and take on team projects with other students.

As time passes, adults should stay connected with what is going on in students' lives and engage in an ongoing dialogue on these happenings. By providing positive feedback, teachers and other adults also can provide a boost to students' feelings of confidence that they can regulate their emotions and reactions to the event. With this type of interaction, students feel the caring, consistent support of adults in their lives and learn new ways of coping.

Connect with and encourage parents to listen to their children's experiences and to share with school personnel any concerns they may have about their children's reactions after the event. Over time, such communication should be a goal. By engaging in open communication and sharing information, adults can track the progress of students' recovery.

### Step 4: Model Calm and Optimistic Behavior

In times of crisis or disaster, children and adolescents watch adult reactions and receive cues on how to confront adversity. This step of LPC — Model & Teach reminds adult staff in schools that they are role models for children. While teachers and other school personnel also will be affected and may not know exactly how they will navigate recovery from disasters themselves, adults can acknowledge their distress but demonstrate a positive and optimistic outlook that they will work together to re-establish safety and peace. In

this way, adults can show students how constructive actions provide hope for the future.

Historical events have shown how this type of modeling and social support from adults can be extremely powerful in children’s recovery from difficult events, including biological hazards such as natural disasters and adversarial and human-caused threats, such as terrorism and large-scale violence. Students will follow the examples set by teachers and parents — watching how they react and how they cope with adversity, particularly during and after stressful events.

Adults can model calm and optimistic behavior in many ways, including the following:

- Maintain level emotions and reactions with students to help them achieve balance;
- Take constructive actions to assure student safety, such as engaging in a safety drill to remind them of how to stay safe or planning a project that improves the physical or social climate of the school;
- Express positive thoughts for the future, like “Recovery from this disaster may take some time, but we’ll work on improving the conditions at our school every day;” and
- Help students to cope with day-to-day challenges by thinking aloud with them about ways they can solve their challenges as they return to school.

## Step 5: Teach

During the recovery from a traumatic event, it is important to educate students about the range of normal stress reactions. School counselors, nurses, psychologists, or social workers are the school mental health staff who can take on this task of teaching students, staff, parents or guardians, and volunteers about the following common reactions to trauma from a specific traumatic event or disaster:

- Physical change
- Emotional changes
- Cognitive changes
- Changes in spiritual beliefs

For example, teachers could say, “After the emergency we have experienced, many students may have trouble sleeping and/or with their attention and concentration. Knowing this, I understand that learning new materials that we are covering may be a bit more difficult. We are going to take it step by step. We will review a little more than usual to be sure we all have it. I have confidence that together we can learn what we need. If you need extra help, let me know. We could also ask our nurse, psychologist, counselor, or social worker to give a short lesson about the usual ways that people react to an emergency and give us examples of how to cope with that stress a little better.”



Adults also should ensure accurate information about new safety measures outlined in the emergency operations plan (EOP), exercises, and ways of staying safe is conveyed to students. Knowledge helps build resilience and increases the ability to cope.

Children may benefit from the experience of helping with recovery efforts. Teachers and other school personnel often serve as a resource for various types of information, programs, and school or community activities. After an emergency, students and families may continue to turn to educators for guidance. The school, for example, may sponsor a poster campaign related to preparedness and resilience or participate in a disaster preparedness or safety fair in the community.

Bake sales can raise money for recovery efforts. Other examples include older students helping to replant trees in areas devastated by wildfires, serving as volunteers to box food or clothing donations, engaging in cleanup efforts around the school, or conducting home or community or letter-writing or drawing campaigns for rescue and recovery personnel. In some events, letter-writing or drawing campaigns for rescue and recovery personnel are schoolwide activities. Children's drawings given to emergency responders often become treasured possessions. Providing information to students and their families about

opportunities for students, families, and volunteers to participate in recovery activities in the school and community is another important role adults can serve and can help in the students' overall recovery.

All adults must remind students and parents that resuming normal routines, including returning to regular school attendance and activities, is important to recovery. By using their everyday teaching skills, educators can help students develop constructive solutions for returning to school after a crisis or disaster, like how to go to school, stay in school, and do well in school, and rely on the support of friends and family.

### When to Implement LPC — Model & Teach

Implement PFA, and specifically the LPC — Model & Teach program, for students after any school emergency incident. Since children can exhibit any range of behaviors after such an event, including those that are difficult to observe externally and require self-report, it is important to anticipate their possible needs and begin the LPC — Model & Teach program immediately following a school- or community-based emergency incident.



## Developmental Concerns When Implementing LPC – Model & Teach

Post-traumatic stress can cause a range of reactions in youths; however, certain responses are more likely with specific phases of child development, and therefore certain coping techniques are more appropriate for specific age groups. Consider incorporating the following age-specific strategies for coping with students' psychological reactions in the five steps of the LPC – Model & Teach to help alleviate stress-related symptoms:

### Preschool age through second grade (3–6 years old)

- Encourage expression through play or drawing.
- Recognize that students may need more patience, attention, and help with daily activities.
- Provide verbal reassurance of safety and physical comfort.

**NOTE:** Among all age groups, post-traumatic stress can take the form of somatic complaints, such as stomachaches, headaches, or general malaise. The school nurse should check out these symptoms. If no physical ailment is detected, proceed with involving the student(s) in the LPC—Model & Teach intervention.

- Remind parents to maintain calm and comfort during play, meal, and bedtime routines.
- Remind parents to monitor adult conversations and exposure to media coverage of the crisis. Children can take in traumatic information from casual adult conversation or from television left on as “background” while adults walk in and out of the room.

## Possible Reactions of Children After Disasters

### Emotional Reactions

- Increased worries or fears about safety of self or others
- Increased worries or fears about security
- Worries or fears about separation
- Worries or fears about reoccurrence of event
- Worries about ongoing situation
- Feelings of guilt or blame
- Feelings of helplessness
- Attitude of seeming not to be affected

### Behavioral Reactions

- Changes in school attendance or performance
- Decreased concentration
- Decreased attention
- Changes in sleep
- Changes in appetite
- Changes in mood (swings)
- Changes in activities
- Increased irritability
- Increased anger outbursts or temper tantrums
- Increased withdrawal
- Regression in behavior

### Cognitive Reactions

- Repeated questions about the event
- Repeated discussion or storytelling about the event
- Repetitive play about the event
- Misattributions and misperceptions about the event
- Increased interest in media coverage
- Trauma reminders (things like sights, thoughts, sounds, tastes, smells, etc., that were present at the time of the traumatic event)
- Loss reminders (those things that serve to remind individuals about what and/or who they have lost because of the disaster or trauma)

### Physiological Reactions

- Increased sensitivity to sound
- Increased startle response
- Increased somatic complaints, including headaches, stomachaches, fatigue, and vague aches and pains

## Elementary school age (5–11 years old)

- Allow students to retell the event and its effect on them through writing activities, art, or music. End the session with a discussion of how students can help to make things better at home, at school, or in the community.
- Recognize that students' attention and concentration may be impaired and affect their learning. To address this, teach stress management techniques, such as controlled breathing and relaxation.
- Review the most recently acquired lessons before introducing new material.
- Involve students in planning and implementing a regular safety exercise or drill.
- Discuss and develop simple class activities or projects that express concern for the victims and survivors and contribute to recovery in the community.
- Maintain discipline measures for aggressive behavior at home or school.
- Do not rationalize bullying or aggressive behaviors "because they have been through so much."
- Remind parents to monitor adult conversations and exposure to media coverage of the crisis.

## Middle and high school age (12 years old and up)

- Encourage students to resume social activities, athletics, and club participation.
- Encourage involvement in constructive community, church, or other volunteer projects to lessen feelings of helplessness.
- Involve students in planning and implementing a regular safety drill.
- Encourage, but do not insist on, discussion of the event or fears with trusted teachers, counselors, peers, or family members.
- Discuss what students have heard from others or seen through media coverage and correct misattributions and misperceptions.
- Help students to understand aggressive or withdrawn behaviors in an effort to numb responses or cope with anger or fear.

## When to Make a Referral

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Seek immediate assistance by following protocols in your school's EOP if students show serious warning signs of suicide, violence, shame, guilt, or plans for revenge.

PFA can be helpful to many students after an emergency. However, if a student exhibits the following behaviors after a post-emergency period of 4 weeks





or longer, the student may need further help, such as a referral to a school or community-based mental health professional. These behavioral changes include

- Statement(s) about feeling suicidal
- Interruption of daily physical functions for an extended period, (e.g., disrupted sleeping, eating)
- New, disruptive behaviors in the classroom, school grounds, or home from students who were previously compliant, or prolonged and increased levels of disruptive behaviors among students who have had discipline problems prior to the crisis or disaster
- Refusal to attend school
- Continued or increasingly severe symptoms such as depressive mood or anxieties that do not improve
- Prolonged fear of separation from caregivers
- Repeated statements about wanting to join a deceased parent or loved one
- High-risk or dangerous behavior, such as acting out sexually, using or abusing substances, driving recklessly, or a combination of these

- Repetitive play or talk in which the student appears to reenact the events alone or with friends over and over without resolution
- Changes in a previously positive parent-child or teacher-student relationship
- Stress symptoms that are highly upsetting to the student or parent(s)

### Staff Training for PFA: LPC – Model & Teach

School counselors, psychologists, and social workers can effectively teach PFA in schools generally within an hour for school faculty and staff as part of the training for the recovery phase of school emergency management. The training should touch briefly on the history and rationale for PFA, underscoring the fact that children and adolescents are far more vulnerable to traumatic stress, anxiety, fear, and confusion than adults are after crises or disasters. In addition, the training must address adult reluctance to intervene or even to speak with child or adolescent survivors of emergency



incidents because of common feelings, like “I don’t know what to say” and “I’m afraid I’ll make it worse.”

The training should conclude with a review of the five phases of PFA for students and teachers: Listen, Protect, Connect, Model, and Teach, including how to implement these phases and ideas for teaching basic coping skills to students.

## Conclusion

PFA requires a mindset that is open to hearing students’ points of view. Every adult in the school regardless of title or position can play an important role in crisis recovery if they follow the five-step LPC — Model & Teach process and possess the following qualities:

- Ability to establish rapport quickly
- Ability to listen to difficult feelings and experiences of others and to empathize and be supportive
- Discretion about the sensitive information that students share
- Awareness of limitations, biases, personal thoughts, and feelings about the event
- Awareness of the need for self-care

Some adults find it very difficult to listen to the pain of children or youths who have suffered injury, abuse, or physical or emotional trauma or loss. But when tragedy or loss strikes a school, educators and other staff are often the “first responders” who can help calm student fears, reestablish a climate of safety, and restore the classroom learning environment using PFA and LPC — Model & Teach intervention.

## Resources

### Further Reading — REMS TA Center

- [Psychological First Aid for Schools \(PFA-S\) At a Glance](#), Web Page
- [10 Tips for Teaching the Psychological First Aid Model for K-12 Education Agencies](#), Publication

### Training Opportunities — REMS TA Center

- [Trauma-Informed Care for Schools Before, During, and After Possible Emergency Events](#), Webinar
- [The Role of School Mental Health Professionals in Supporting School Safety Efforts](#), Webinar
- [Managing Memorials and Anniversaries as a Part of Overall School and Higher Ed Safety Planning](#), Webinar
- [School EOPs In-Depth: Developing a Bereavement and Loss Annex](#), Online Course
- [Responding to Bereavement and Loss](#), Specialized Training Package

### Further Reading — PFA

- [Psychological First Aid for Schools \(PFA-S\) Field Operations Guide](#), Publication (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN])
- [Psychological First Aid for Schools](#), Webinar (NCTSN)
- [Psychological First Aid for Displaced Children and Families](#), Publication (NCTSN)
- [Psychological First Aid for Unaccompanied Children](#), Publication (NCTSN)
- [Psychological First Aid](#), Online Course (NCTSN)

