

Tips for helping children who must adjust to a new school

General Suggestions

- Be sure that teachers know how trauma affects children and teenagers. This information is available from Project Reassure at www.projectreassure.org. Teachers and other adults can be more helpful and patient, if they know the reactions to expect.
- Trauma survivors have a lot on their minds and may not remember well. Be patient. You may need to explain things over and over.
- Write down important information. This allows children and their families to read the ideas again. This helps with memory, especially for those also struggling with learning and emotional problems.
- Try to find out if there are reminders of the disaster that upset the child or teen. For example, you can ask, "Sometimes people who have been through a disaster can get scared or upset all over again, even when they are safe. That can happen because they have reminders of the bad days. Some examples are a siren, or a thunderstorm, or a fire drill. Can you help us to know what reminds you of the hurricane or other bad times? That way, we can try to prepare you for these reminders or not have them happen."
- Let children know that you understand that they may feel overwhelmed and scared by all the changes. Tell them that the teachers and support staff will help them get used to the new school. Show children that it is okay if they feel confused or don't understand something.
- If possible, plan time when new students can meet privately with their new teachers. Ask the teachers to show the children the books they will use and to explain how the classroom works.
- Introduce the child to a 'contact' person to whom the child can go at any time to talk. This might be a teacher, counselor, paraprofessional, or volunteer.
- If possible, pair the child with another student who can answer questions, sit with her/him at lunch, and introduce her/him to others. Many schools already have friendship programs to assist students with disabilities.
- Tell the children that it is okay to talk about their experiences with other children, but they don't have to if it makes them uncomfortable.
- Discourage others from asking too many questions. "Our new students may not want to talk about the bad things that have happened. Please do not ask; just be a good listener."

Getting used to the building

- Many children with learning difficulties feel “lost” in a new building. They may have difficulty with spatial relations (knowing where they are and how to go to different places). To make them more comfortable, take the students’ schedules and practice walking from class to class.
- When possible, take the children for a walk through the school when other students are not there. This helps students who have problems with their attention. Help them get used to the new building and play areas.
- If the youth can follow a floor plan, practice using one.
- If the child needs more help, assign a classmate to serve as a “buddy” for changing classes. [In a high school, try to identify someone for each class change.]

Learning the way your school does and says things

Help students feel more comfortable by explaining the way people talk in your school. The language differences can be small but embarrassing, especially for students who struggle with speech and language problems. After all, they just want to “fit in.” Here are some suggestions:

- Ask classes to write a little booklet to orient new students. Include a glossary for words that people at school will use. Explain abbreviations that people in your school use. (for example, “lav” means restroom; “South Caf” means the cafeteria located on the first floor near the gym; “little gym” means the one on the lower floor, “cubby” means the coatroom.).
- Add to the booklet this kind of information: the school’s name and nicknames; the school’s mascot, motto, colors, and song; the names of special events that the school hosts each year (for example, “We celebrate the 100th day of school. Here is what we do that day. It is a lot of fun.”)
- Younger students may write welcoming letters. Be sure that they describe what they *like* about their school. An adult should “screen” the letters before sharing them with the new students.
- If your school hosts a large number of displaced students, you might set up a student-run information booth in the cafeteria.
- Teens are especially sensitive about clothes. If your school requires uniforms or has a dress code, try to provide clothing for the displaced students. A clothing drive can be a good way for teens to help their new classmates. However, new students may be embarrassed by wearing hand-me-downs from their classmates. Work out a partnership. Suggest that your school collect clothing to give to a *different* district. Then collect and use clothes donated by another district.
- New students may speak with an unfamiliar accent. Remind students not to mimic their speech. If you live in a region where people speak quickly, suggest

that they slow down. Slowing down will help those who are adjusting to your region's accent. A good way to make yourself slow down is to take a breath between sentences.