

School Safety and Crisis

Preparing for Infectious Disease Epidemics: Brief Tips for School Mental Health Professionals

Schools should be prepared for local or community-wide infectious disease outbreaks. This document provides guidance for school-employed professionals who are asked to help students and school staff members cope with the mental health challenges generated by this stressor. Suggestions for how school administration and the multidisciplinary crisis response team can be better prepared to respond to these events is offered within the companion documents, [Responding to COVID-10](#) and [Preparing for a Pandemic Illness](#). “In general, encouraging preparedness and promoting actions that mitigate danger presented by infectious disease spread (as described in the companion guidance documents) make these stressors more **predictable** and more **controllable**. And by doing so, this reduces the event’s potential to generate traumatic stress. Actions that promote the predictability and perceived controllability of any infectious disease outbreak include:



Ensure the timely **distribution of facts** that (a) reduce health risks and (b) help to accurately gauge the degree of threat presented by disease outbreak. While it is helpful to encourage a level of stress that promotes adaptive behavior (e.g., hand washing), overestimating risk can be counterproductive. This can be a delicate balancing act, and guidance provided by the [CDC](#) can help schools strike this balance.



Encourage all school community members to **take adaptive actions**. Controllability of a stressful event is increased when specific guidance is given regarding protective actions (e.g., frequent handwashing, staying home if you are sick). Again, refer to the [CDC](#) for the latest advice on what can be done to keep yourself and others safe.



Let students know **adults are working to ensure safety**. Especially among younger students, controllability of the situation is increased when they understand that adults are working hard to shield them from danger. For older students, to the extent such information is accurate and available, this may include bringing to their attention advances being made in finding vaccines and effective treatments.



Especially among primary grade students, appreciate that understanding of the danger presented by a situation is **determined by the behavior of caregiving adults**. Ensure that the behavior of these caregivers (especially teachers) is consistent with the objective threat presented by the infectious disease outbreak.

RELATED RESOURCES

- Preparing for a Pandemic Illness: Guidelines for School Administrators and Crisis Teams:
<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crises/preparing-for-a-pandemic-illness-guidelines-for-school-administrators-and-school-crisis-response-teams>
- Responding to COVID-19: Immediate Action Steps for School Crisis Response Teams:
<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crises/responding-to-covid-19brief-action-steps-for-school-crisis-response-teams>
- Talking to Children About COVID-19 (coronavirus): A Parent Resource:
[https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crises/talking-to-children-about-covid-19-\(coronavirus\)-a-parent-resource](https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crises/talking-to-children-about-covid-19-(coronavirus)-a-parent-resource)
- Interim Guidance for Administrators of U.S. Childcare Programs and K-12 Schools to Plan, Prepare, and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19):
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/specific-groups/guidance-for-schools.html>

For more information, visit http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety.

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