

Families facing tough times: Tips for talking to your child's school



At some stage, most families will experience tough times. It is a normal part of life, but some experiences that families face can be harder for children to cope with than others.

Children can be especially impacted by the difficulties their families face. When children are impacted by family difficulties, they may have troubles with their emotions; their behaviours; and how they are coping at school.

This tip sheet can provide you with some information on talking to your child's school about difficulties your family may be facing. These difficulties may include family issues such as separation, divorce, domestic violence or abuse; family health issues; or other issues such as the loss of a family member or having a parent or family member in jail.

When young people have trouble coping with family difficulties, the impacts of this are frequently seen at school, both in the classroom and in the playground. As a parent or caregiver, it is a good idea to take a proactive approach in sharing information with your child's school about family difficulties and the impacts on your child.

This allows teachers and school staff to:

- Understand the impacts, behaviours and difficulties that may be seen at school, and;
- Provide support to your child, and possibly your family, within in the school or through referral to additional services within the community.

Even if family difficulties occur during school holidays, it can still be important to share this information with teachers and school staff once classes resume. Your child may appear to cope fine during the holidays, but become overwhelmed once school starts again.

Common impacts of difficulties seen within schools

Family life difficulties can impact your child's experience at school in a number of ways. These may include:

- difficulties concentrating in class
- becoming disruptive in class
- a loss of interest in school work and other school activities they once enjoyed
- irritability, or becoming easily upset
- relationship difficulties with teachers and peers

Families facing tough times: Tips for talking to your child's school

It is best that any problems your child may be having at school are recognised and addressed early on. Impacts which may seem small initially could lead to further problems down the road, such as falling behind in learning or ongoing difficulties with peers

Who to talk to at school

When deciding to talk to your child's school about family difficulties, it is common to be unsure of who exactly you should talk to. Some good points of contact within the school may include:

- The Principal of the school or another member of the school executive
- Your child's main teacher
- Your child's home room teacher
- The school counsellor or psychologist

You may need to ask your child what their daily routine is at the school, as well as the names of their teachers, to determine who you should talk to. If you are still unsure, the front desk or school office should be able to connect you with the right person to speak with.

How to communicate with the school

Schools are often busy places and sometimes it can be tricky to find an opportunity to speak with your child's teacher. While communicating face to face can be helpful for schools to get a good understanding of how your child and family are going, emailing or phoning the school is also useful. An initial phone call or email can lead to the opportunity for a time to come in and meet.

What to talk about

You can provide as much detail about the difficulties your family is facing as you feel comfortable with. Simply informing your child's

school that your family is facing difficulties and that these are impacting on your child, is often enough.

It is also helpful to talk about how your child might be coping both at home and at school and what has helped them to get through tough times in the past. The school may be able to offer some extra help and support to your child at school, and may be able to link you to other support within the local community. You can also ask to make sure that your families situation is kept private within the school. In most cases, only your child's teacher and the school executive (i.e. principal) should need to be aware of the situation

It is important to remember that most families experience tough times at some point or another. Talking to your child's school about these difficulties can help your child get the support they need to get through these tough times.

For more information:

Trauma & Grief Network: Supporting Families

www.tgn.anu.edu.au

Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network (ACATLGN)

www.earlytraumagrieff.anu.edu.au

This tipsheet was written by Nathan Haymes, Research Assistant for the Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network; and Amanda Harris, Psychologist and Director of the Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network (ACATLGN).