CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES TO HELP CHILDREN PROCESS WHAT THEY HAVE GONE THROUGH IN THE CHENNAI FLOODS

What is the purpose of such activities?

For children to recover well from such disasters, we need to actually encourage them to understand what happened and form a story of the events.

An example of what happens when such a trauma stays with a child: Even in their adult life if they are in a situation of heavy rain, they may start panicking and find it hard to deal with it. The brain goes into fight or flight mode very quickly when faced with crisis.

These activities will help to **overcome their fears and anxieties and heal** and come out of this incident stronger and more confident.

We may wonder if there is a purpose to such activities if only some children were affected. But in reality every child in the city has been impacted directly or indirectly. Even those, whose homes were not flooded, have watched endless coverage on TV and maybe feeling helpless to know so many others suffered including their classmates. Those without electricity for days could have found it frightening. They may have seen their parents get anxious about food and drinking water and this may have scared them. Hence all children will have something to share about this disaster.

Each group of children and each classroom is unique and different. These are ideas which can be adapted and built upon according to the needs of the children in your class. Teachers can support each other to develop ideas which work for your particular environment.

Warm up activities

Working with modeling clay or play doh is often the most simple and least threatening. The child does not have to make any form that we are familiar with or attach any meaning to it. Even the simple motion of rolling the clay into long strips or into a ball or kneading the clay can be very calming. If the child does not like the texture of wet clay, try using a slightly drier clay or home-made maida play doh.

Putting a big blob of paint on a large piece of paper and letting the child only use palms and fingers is another good warm up activity. No brushes at this stage. Keep a choice of the basic colours - red, blue, green, yellow, black, white, brown - for the child to choose what they would like. Let the child move his/her hands all over the paper in whatever motion they want.

Other activities

Different techniques and media could be used with the child. What you use will depend on the age and ability of the child and the child's inclination. You can also use a combination of the techniques. What follows is a broad guideline only.

1. Story completion

Group or individual

Age group- 6+

Materials: Nothing but your imagination!

Method: Sit in a circle with the children, if working in a group. Start a story with a few lines. For instance, "*The sky turned grey. Dark clouds gathered. It rained and rained the whole day*". Your lines should not be leading. The children then take turns in adding about 2-3 lines.



The story can go on till it reaches some natural completion. You can stop midway if you feel what any of the children have contributed has to be responded to immediately. When it comes to your turn again, try and capture the feelings the children have expressed and tell it back to them in words, thus helping them have the words to express what they are feeling. For e.g.. If a child has said, "*The clouds were big and dark, the thunder was very loud and there were huge flashes of lightning"*, you could say, "*You might have been very scared"*. This could be a starting point for a further discussion. You could also stop if it has been discussed enough.

2. Sentence completion

Group or individual

Age group: 6+

Materials: Pencil / pen and paper. Can also be done orally, if children do not read and write.

Method: Similar to the above, but the facilitator starts a sentence and leaves it incomplete. You could do about 10-12 sentences of which a few could be some general ones like, "*There's no school and ....." "Sachin Tendulkar ...." "I love.....".*

And some pertaining to what you want to discuss. "*The rains....." "My home...." I feel scared when ....." I feel happy when ...."*

3. Making a song together

Group or individual

Age group: 6 +





Materials: lots of creativity and some sense of tune and rhythm!

Method: Similar to the above, but put a tune and rhythm to the lines and let each child add one or two lines. Don't worry too much about rhyming though children may struggle to find rhyming words. Other children or you may help a child who may be struggling.

4. Making dolls or puppets and doing a role play

Group or individual

Age group: 8+



Materials: Socks to make puppets. Buttons, wool, thread, cloth for features on puppets/ dolls, glue

Method: Ask children to pick up any material and make a doll/ puppet. Once dolls are made, ask children to assign a character to it. Tell the children we are going to enact a story. Give them the first lines. "*Once upon a time, in the city of Chennai, around early evening, it got very dark. The skies turned grey. The wind was howling. And it started raining. This was no ordinary rain. It just went on and on. That whole evening... The whole night... The next morning... The next afternoon... The next evening... The next night... It just would not stop.....*"

Then follow as for story completion. It can also be light hearted and fun, while looking at some of the deeper issues they may be facing.

EXPRESSING EMOTIONS THROUGH ART



Doing art with children who have been in a traumatic situation is a powerful tool to help children express and address their inner fears, anxieties as well as any other feelings they may be going through. The art the child creates can function as a starting point to talk about what the child may be going through. Sometimes, the child may not want to talk about it, but the art will give clues and flag off issues to the adult which will have to be addressed by the parents or the teachers or both.

Facilitating the process to the child creating the art

It is important to create a non-judgmental non-threatening environment if we really want the child's true feelings to come out. In other words, we should refrain from commenting whether the drawing is good or giving suggestions on how the drawing can be improved or that a particular colour may have looked better. The purpose is to get the child to express something that s/he may find difficult to do in words.

The process of creating the art, which is the child's own expression, is more important than the final product or how 'good' it is. If we keep this in mind, we lift the pressure off both ourselves as well as, more importantly, the child!

How does a child express a feeling through art? It sounds like it is very complex but it's actually quite simple. A child who may be very angry and frustrated may take a piece of clay and really pound it. Or keep obsessively rolling it. What the child is doing is working out her/ his frustration through working the clay. In other words, s/he is expressing her/ his anger and frustration through the clay.

Facilitating a discussion around the art

Children will respond best if your facilitation seeks to explore and understand the child. It may not help very much to keep questioning them too much. Rather, it may be better to listen, make a comment on what they are saying. You could make a comment on something that strikes you about the art like, "I notice the water level is higher than the house". Keep it factual to what you observe in the art, not your own analysis of the art. Silence is often the most powerful tool of facilitation. But sometimes, children get stuck, they cannot express in words what they are feeling, quite like many of us when we are in distress. At such times, please do feel free to probe a little without leading them on too much, without putting your thoughts and feelings into their heads. Do try and ask questions that can be as neutral as possible.



ART ACTIVITIES

1. Crayons

Individual

Age group: 4+ - younger children may not be able to discuss what they have created but will often be able to create something that reflects what they are going through. You may need to give them the words.

Materials: paper, oil pastels - avoid giving pencil and rubber - they get too caught in making the perfect drawing!

Method: Before the session, remove the paper surrounding the crayon so the child can have unhindered use of it. Keep about 2-3 crayons for the younger child and 4-5 crayons for the older ones. If they ask for any other colour from the box, please give them.
Give the children a couple of sheets of paper to just scribble - free flowing lines on the paper. This can be done even with older children, in fact needs to be done, just to loosen them up.
Then slowly bring them to what you want to focus on. You can start by saying something like, *"We've been having such heavy rains in Chennai and then the floods. Would you like to use these crayons to draw something about this?"*

Once the child has finished, pick up elements in the art to discuss with the child. Typically you would find something that is troubling the child. For e.g. The waters may be higher than the house. Comment on it and say, *"Is that usual? What did all of you do when the waters rose? How did you feel when the waters were so high" etc. or they may draw their experience of moving to someone else's house. You could then ask, "What did all of you do there?", "What did you like there?", "Was there anything uncomfortable?"*

Discuss as much or as little as the child wants to. You could do follow up sessions too.

2. Painting



Individual
Age group:4+
Materials: poster or watercolours, brush - flat and round, of different sizes, water, bowls for mixing, rag to clean space
Method: begin with some warm up work allowing the child to do whatever s/he wants on the paper. Once the child has loosened up a bit, proceed the way outlined above with the crayons.

3. Modeling Clay/ play doh

Individual
Age group: 3+
Materials: Potters clay or maida play doh, a piece of cardboard (slightly bigger than an A4 sheet of paper), some tools like a rolling pin, a safe knife, from a play set or a butter knife with NO sharp edges.



Method: initially give the child some clay to just use as s/he wants. Then ask her/ him if she would like to make something out of it. If

s/he doesn't want to, leave it and once s/he is done with it, move to another activity.
If the child wants to continue, give the child some more clay and let her/ him make whatever they want. Use what the child makes for a discussion. For ex. Child may make vessels and smash them or break them in some way. This could indicate some anxiety with respect to home being lost. Or child may make a bed and a child sleeping on it, indicating some need for security.

It is important to always check with the child if what you think the child is feeling is really what they are feeling or thinking. You could say, "*It looks like the doll you made/ the girl would like to sleep on a nice bed with a quilt over her. Is that correct?"*
Do the activity as long as the child is engaged with it.

4. Collage
Group and individual
Age group: 6+
Material: a lot of used material such as waste pieces of cloth, rope, thread, wool, buttons, lace, cardboard pieces, magazines, sack, jute etc. Also, scissors, glue, a large chart paper on which the collage is to be done.



This activity can be done after a discussion using techniques like story completion or sentence completion. Or you could give children a theme such as, 'The floods in Chennai.' Let them discuss it a little and then decide how they want to portray it.
Use the collage for further discussion on the lines listed in the above techniques.

Discussion around these activities:

The teacher can use the guidelines given for communication below to facilitate these activities. The purpose is to make the child feel heard. For them to know there are caring adults who will keep them safe and for them to know that we take their feelings seriously. That they do not have to hide and pretend to be “brave”. It will also help them to feel connected to the teacher and their classmates.

If the teacher comes to know from drawings, writings, conversation or behaviour that a child is particularly disturbed, call the parent to discuss what needs to be done to help them child, even professional help is required.

GUIDELINES FOR COMMUNICATION WHEN CHILDREN SHARE:

If we want to help children heal the most powerful tool is allowing them to share without giving them reasons and logical answers.

Allow them to name the feelings - I was **scared.** I am **sad** that my books and toys got spoilt. I am **angry** this happened.

The teacher can even write many feeling words on the board - upset, frightened, excited, irritated, sad and let them use what resonates for them. This helps children build emotional intelligence.

Do not brush their feelings aside by saying, “Don't worry. It will all be fine. Be grateful, others have suffered more than you.”

Every child’s loss is real for them.

Acknowledge their feelings by saying,

- “I can imagine you are upset.”
- “I know this must be a hard time for you.”
- “You miss the things you lost.”

For older children:

- “You may have felt worried and responsible for the elders in the house”
- “I see you are upset about the damage to your home and the stress for your parents.”
- “Looks like you are angry about the man made contribution to this.”

A note to teachers

The above activities may help the child make sense of what has been happening. For many of them, this would be enough. Some may need a few follow up sessions. There may be some who may need professional help. Please be sure to communicate to parents on what you have observed with each child and how parents can also help reach out to the child.

And yes, the theme on which we are attempting to work with children is serious. But do remember we can also have fun and make the process, at least in parts, joyful, while always respecting that for some children it would have been very distressing.

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