Death of a Classmate or Teacher

The death of a classmate or teacher can be almost as devastating as the death of a family member and should be acknowledged as such. If the teacher has died, rather than abruptly introducing an unknown substitute, the principal, or counselor should talk over the class and assist in transitioning the children to a new and carefully chosen teacher.

- The child's or teacher's desk should not be immediately removed. Leaving it as it was for several days, may help acknowledge the death. Some classrooms have voted to keep the desk through the remainder of the school year.
- Get as much information as possible from the family and ask their permission to share it with the class. Ask if they have any objections to students attending the funeral.
- Tell the class before telling the rest of the school. Ask the class if they would like to attend the funeral if their parents give permission.

Tell the truth, allow for ventilation, and affirm all expressions (as above). Because the classmates knew the deceased classmate or teacher intimately, their initial focus may be on him or her rather than their own feelings. After explaining what happened, you might talk about fond memories of the deceased and ask the children to do the same.

Some children, however, will be too numb to reminisce because they are so preoccupied with the death.Some may focus more on their personal loss, such as the child who, after his teacher suddenly died, asked "Why couldn't she wait until the field trip? Such statements are genuine expressions of loss.

If the children will not talk use a "write a paragraph or draw a picture" exercise, allow expression or memories. Some children are reluctant to talk about their feelings because they fear no one else feels the way they do.

- Allow breaks. Children grieve intermittently and cannot focus on their grief for extended periods. Resume the regular classroom schedule after the break.
- Watch for trouble signs among the children such as increased aggression, withdrawal, risk-taking, clumsiness, or regression. After the death of a classmate, a boy began to fall down more frequently. He later explained the he fell to hide his crying because he was sure he was the only one still sad about the death.

Possible facilitation/follow up questions for teachers to assist them with processing the event with students.

1. I'm having mixed thoughts about this. What were your thoughts when you heard about the announcement?
2. Do you plan to go home and talk with adults/parents about this? Who are some adults that you can talk to about this?
3. We have counselors available in our school today to talk with you.
4. If you have experienced similar losses in your own lives, how are you feeling now? Where are places you can go to discuss these feelings?
5. What can you/we do to help our classmates at times like this?