- **Plan** for the return of the bereaved child. **Guide** the class in deciding what to say and how to act when the bereaved child returns to school. The subject should not be ignored, yet not every student should expect the bereaved child to want to talk about it. In addition to the death in the family, it is devastating for the bereaved child to be abandoned by friends at school, thus experiencing another psychological loss.

Classmates might acknowledge it with a statement like, "I'm glad you're back. I am very sorry your mother died" and then treat the child as they did before the death. Closer friends might say, "I feel so bad for you and would like for you to tell me about it when you feel up to it."

- **Look for trouble signs** when the bereaved child returns. Some elementary age children will like to stay home following a death, possibly out of fear. "Will I die?" or "Will someone else I love die?" are common fears. Staying home should be discouraged. Bereaved children are easily distracted and they are frequently confused and forgetful. Emotional outburst of anger are common. Stomachaches, headaches, eating and sleeping disorders may increase because grief is physical as well as emotional. When this things happen, children need acceptance and support more than discipline. They need to feel they are loved in spite of their behavior.

Discipline should **not** be relaxed during bereavement, nor should it be enhanced. Teachers should expect and accept a regression in the quality of work of a bereaved student . A graduated curriculum may be necessary. The child may be assigned the same homework, only less of it, to maintain self esteem despite lowered concentration. After school tutoring may become necessary if the quality of the students work is seriously diminished.

Bereaved children need to tell and retell the story of what happened to them. It helps them process it, piece by piece, until they form their own developmentally realistic understanding of it. As Rabbi Earl Grollman says, **"If it is mentionable, it is manageable."**

Elementary School

Death of Parents or Siblings of Classmate

The school is usually informed of parents and sibling death from some source other than the bereaved child since the child will be absent from school for several days. Children who knew the parent or sibling of their classmate may react strongly to the death, but are often overlooked because of their indirect involvement.

Also frequently overlooked are those who did not know the deceased well, but had memorable interactions with them. For example, a young girl accidentally hit her friend's sister with a ball she was tossing and was unable to convince her that it was an accident. A week later, the girl who had been hit died unexpectedly, leaving the girl who hit her with extremely distressing feelings of guilt. Another child who was playfully teased by a classmate's older sibling, though he didn't know the sibling well, reacted strongly when the sibling died.

Elementary school children can feel very anxious after learning of a death because they are so dependent upon their own parents and siblings.

They may worry about what would happen to them if it had been their own parent or sibling who died.

For the first time, they may be aware of their own vulnerability to death. Teachers and other school professionals may hear students say "Children are not supposed to die." Some children may become fearful, overly cautious, clumsy or aggressive.

If the death of the parent or sibling is upsetting to many students, the **Crisis Intervention Team may be called to assist the initial discussion about the death.** The principles below are important to all classroom discussions about the death.

- **Tell the truth.** Before telling the class, get as much information as possible from the family about the death. Tell the class what happened in terms that are appropriate to their own cognitive and developmental levels. For example, children may be concerned about whether the person was in pain or why someone did not stop the death. If the person died in surgery, the professional and the teacher will need to be able to discuss the rarity of this occurrence and that the surgery itself did not cause the death (if that is true). accurate information is central to the child's ability to analyze events and draw personally relevant conclusions.
- **Avoid giving unnecessary information** that would only serve to distress or confuse the children. Avoid creating mental images of frightening or horrifying sights. Dispel any "Halloween-type" myths, which are common among elementary age children. Elementary age children think very concretely. Therefore, explain concretely what happened. Hearing the truth may help to stop rumors. Out of their own anxiety, children will need to talk about the death, and if they don't have accurate information, they may distort the truth. For example, a five-year-old boy whose father was killed
- by a gunshot was told by other children that his father was a "bad guy" because only "bad guys" get killed. Young children, especially, may need reassurance more than once that rumors are not true.
- **Allow for expression/affirm all expressions.** After telling the children, set aside at least 30 minutes of time and offer them the opportunity to share their feelings about it. A student may say, I'm glad it didn't happen to me." That's a very honest response. It should be affirmed, not as self-centered, but as honest. If a student begins to cry, let him or her know that feeling sad at a time like this is very normal. Crying over something that is very sad is different from acting like a baby. Overly distraught children should be referred to the Crisis Team or a counselor.
- Set aside time for **written expressions for the bereaved child.** Notes, letters, or pictures created for the bereaved child mean a lot. The class can decide if they want their notes and pictures to be taken to the home before the child returns to school, or if they want to wait until the bereaved child returns. ALWAYS screen those projects before delivering them. Older elementary children can be amazingly cruel out of their own fear and anxiety. Insensitive expressions signal a need for emotional help.