

HOW STAFF CAN ASSIST A GRIEVING SCHOOL

Following a death, those left behind grieve in a variety of ways. This handout is intended to provide a guide for your use in assisting those affected in the next few days and weeks as they resolve their feelings related to the death.

STEP 1

Attend all mandatory staff meetings. You will be given information and guidance about how to announce and discuss the death with your students.

STEP 2

Allow some opportunity for students to acknowledge and discuss their feelings. There will be a range of emotions from shock, anger, guilt, confusion, sadness, numbness to denial. All feelings are normal and it is important to acknowledge that normalcy.

If you do not feel comfortable talking with your students, please ask the crisis team for assistance. Here are some guidelines to follow if you do speak to your class:

Share the feelings you experienced when you were told of the death. Then ask “What was it like for you when you heard the news?”

Use the words “died” or “is dead”. Avoid euphemisms for death (i.e. “passed away”, “taken from us”).

Encourage students to share positive memories they have had with the person and initiate this conversation if needed.

Be an active listener. Remind students that all feelings are okay and need to be appropriately expressed.

Reassure students they are not responsible for what happened.

Allow students to share and discuss other losses they have experienced. Ask “What other deaths have you experienced?”

Recognize that laughter and play don’t mean the student did not care for the person who died.

Encourage students to discuss their feelings with their parents/guardians. Then ask “How do you think the conversation will go?”

Admit that you don’t have all the answers and handle questions of theology by explaining that people have varied beliefs and encourage them to discuss this with their parents.

Encourage students to help and nurture each other and let them know where there are adult supports in the building. Ask them “How can you help each other through this?” (i.e. talking, touching, playing, notes, tears.)

Say things like

“Go ahead and cry. It takes courage to express your sadness.”

“Would you like to talk about your tears?”

“You don’t have to be strong for me.”

“You have the right to feel_____”

“I know you are doing the best you can under these circumstances.”

“I know it will take time for you to feel better. I will help you as much as I can.”

“I can’t tell you what to do because I am not you and I never had this happen to me.”

“I know you cared about this person and feel a great sense of loss.”

“I know memories are a poor substitute for having this person with you, but I hope they will give you some comfort.”

Please avoid saying things like:

“I know how you feel.”

“It could be worse.”

“Everything is going to be okay.”

“But you still have....”

“Oh well, we all have to die sometime.”

STEP 3

Send names of students or the students themselves to the crisis room if they seem high risk now or as the week progresses. High risk behaviors may look like:

- Harming self or others
- Disrupting
- Inconsolable crying
- Physiological changes (tired, headaches, stomach aches)
- Excessive fear, worries, disorganization
- Complete denial of death
- Guilt or self-blame
- Regression (rocking, baby talk, thumb sucking)

STEP 4

Get back to your regular daily routine as soon as possible.

STEP 5

Attend the debriefing meeting after school to discuss how the day went and share feelings, concerns and successes.

STEP 6

Self-Care:

Engage in both vigorous physical exercise and more rest than you usually get

Debrief your day with a trusted family member or friend

Eat well balanced and regular meals

Do something you enjoy

Express your feelings as they arise so they don’t bottle up inside

If feelings become prolonged or too intense, seek a good counselor for help

GRIEF CHARACTERISTICS (5-12 YEARS)

Death may be seen as temporary. Young children are just learning about the permanence of death.

Children may feel guilt that their own thoughts or actions caused the death.

Children may think death is like sleep and may develop a fear of sleep and darkness or nightmares.

Children may appear “indifferent” to the death or laugh and seem happy at times.
Children usually engage in play activities to express their grief. They may create writings or drawings with a dark twist to them.
Children may be excessively clingy or try to overly please adults.
Children may have more stomach aches, headaches, rashes, or other physical symptoms.
Children may show regressive behaviors such as bed-wetting and temper tantrums.
Children may experience tearfulness over things they normally wouldn’t cry over, angry outbursts or “melt downs,” fear of being alone or withdrawal.
Children may have an excessive curiosity about the death wanting to know many details surrounding the circumstances of the death.

HOW ADULTS CAN HELP

Be available to listen and reassure.
Children cope best by understanding. They need simple, honest and accurate information.
Use language they can understand while explaining processes such as embalming, cremation, funeral services, burial, etc.
Understand and accept any and all feelings and reactions.
Model your own grief; children learn from adult role models, so share your grief.
Try to maintain a “normal” routine. Let them know their lives will go on.
Allow children to participate in memorials, funerals and other rituals if they want to and attend with your child.
Help children remember the deceased person by making a memory box, book or journal.
Encourage children to play. This is often how they share and communicate their feelings.
Be patient. Understand that grief work takes time.
Take care of yourself so you can be available to support the child.
Get professional help if needed.