

Helping our Children in Times of Crisis

The best thing we can offer at this difficult time is to do everything we can to attend to the social and emotional needs of our children. As a community we need to mobilize the support of our community resources that can provide the primary intervention and support that our children may need to express and begin to resolve their personal reactions to a devastating loss or national crisis. Our school district has a crisis team that they can count during difficult times, but it would be helpful if other agencies in the community who serve children and families to be prepared. They may consider setting up a support room, supplied with water and snacks, where people can meet in small groups to share reactions/feelings with a trained counselor, if needed.

In the course of the day and for weeks after a tragedy, teachers in schools and other community agencies need to monitor children and are encourage to model meaningful and compassionate ways to talk and share their feelings. School is a place where children are encouraged to learn and ask questions about things they do not know or understand. Obviously, this will include the concept of death and loss. All things seem to have a time and a season and grief is no exception. You want to offer a place of normalcy and routine and allow students to be with their friends and teachers with the support of counselors and adults they trust. When someone dies, children have three often-unasked questions. Did I cause this? Who will keep me safe? Is this going to happen to me too, or will this happen to my mom or dad?

What we can do:

- Model calm and control. Children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives. While you can share your sadness, avoid being overly anxious and upset. It is certainly acceptable to cry with them, you are modeling appropriate display of emotion and giving them permission to do so. If you have trouble staying in control, ask for someone else to take over and take a time out. Let children know that it is okay to feel sad, be upset or worried and that help is available.
- Explain that all feelings are okay when we lose someone we love or hear of someone else going through a difficult time and every person has their own unique way of dealing with loss and expressing their feelings. Encourage them to talk about and share their feelings. The intensity of children's reactions, and ways they express their feelings, will depend on how close they were to the person who died, their personal experience with loss, general mental health, other stress factors in their lives, their coping style and their support network.
- Assure students that they are safe and that the school is well prepared to take care of them at all times. Remind them to be "good listeners" and always follow the instructions given to them by the adults in their school or by their parents at home.
- Maintain structure and stability within the school and get students back to their routine as soon as possible. It would be best if you can minimize anxiety and expectations by not having tests or major projects in the next day or so following a crisis.
- Use a brief statement to announce occurrence of the loss to your children. Tell them the truth and stick to the facts. Be a good and patient listener. Provide simple, factual, direct answers to the child's question and refrain from long explanations and over burdening the child. When children are ready for more information they will return with more questions.
- As you monitor your children's reactions, make sure to refer children who appear highly distressed to a counselor for more one-on-one support.

- Be aware of children who may have recently experienced a personal tragedy or have a personal connection to the event. Provide those students with extra support if necessary.
- If you refer a student for counseling in school make sure that you inform the parents.
- Allow time for age appropriate discussion and provide opportunities to talk and remember. Activities can include art and writing projects, play acting, physical games, listening to music, creating a dance. Peer activities are important for older students. Help them brainstorm what they can do to help their grieving friends. Provide an outlet for students' desire to help. Consider making a class card and sending it to the students who have experienced the loss or to the families affected by the tragedy. Make a class banner of special memories or thoughts about the person, or expressions of sympathy to the family.
- Look for reactions that would be considered signs in need of intervention and referral to a trained counselor. Such as dramatic and unexpected changes in behavior, decreased attention and or concentration, increase in hyperactivity and aimless activity, changes in academic performance, excessive clinging to caregivers, irritability with friends, teachers, events, anger outbursts and or aggression, withdrawal, absenteeism from school, increased somatic complaints such as headaches, stomachaches, chest pains, repeated discussion of the event/loss, repetitive thoughts and comments about death and dying, changes in sleep or appetite, lack of interest in usual activities, increased negative behaviors such as defiance, prolonged sadness, fears, worries, increased risk for substance abuse, including drinking with adolescents. If you observe a cluster of these symptoms for more than a few weeks after the death has occurred, please refer them to one of the crisis counselors.
- Children dealing with a crisis have more of a need for affection and a sense of security. Be available to them. They need to know that they can count on the adults in their lives to listen to them, support them, be honest with them and love them.
- If students decide to attend the funeral, a parent or another adult should accompany them. Funerals are important to survivors at any age because they help them acknowledge that someone died and provide a structure to support and assist them through the initial period of mourning, provide a time to honor, remember and affirm the life of the person who died.
- School is where we equip children for life, and loss is a very important part of life. At any age, grieving is not a weakness, it's considered a necessity. Expect curiosity from the students and you are expected to return it with honesty.

Submitted by
 Patricia P. Gage, PhD, NCSP
 School & Consulting Psychologist
 Brain Smart Academics, LLC

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