

The Dougy Center

When Death Impacts Your School

These lessons have been adapted from the books *Helping the Grieving Student: A Guide for Teachers* and *When Death Impacts Your School: A Guide for School Administrators*. To order copies of these books, visit our online bookstore or contact The Dougy Center, 503-775-5683.

Dealing with Grieving Students in Your Class

The following steps help support the grieving students as well as prepare your class for making the grieving student feel comfortable and supported:

1. Talk with the bereaved student before she returns.

Ask her what she wants the class to know about the death, funeral arrangements, etc. If possible, call the family prior to the student's return to school so that you can let her know you are thinking of her and want to help make her return to school as supportive as possible.

2. Talk to your class about how grief affects people and encourage them to share how they feel.

One way to do this is to discuss what other types of losses or deaths the students in your class have experienced, and what helped them cope.

3. Discuss how difficult it may be for their classmate to return to school, and how they may be of help.

You can ask your class for ideas about how they would like others to treat them if they were returning to school after a death, pointing out differences in preferences. Some students might like to be left alone; others want the circumstances discussed freely. Most grieving students say that they want everyone to treat them the same way that they treated them before. In general, they don't like people being "extra nice." While students usually say they don't want to be in the spotlight, they also don't want people acting like nothing happened.

4. Provide a way for your class to reach out to the grieving classmate and his or her family.

One of the ways that students can reach out is by sending cards or pictures to the child and family, letting them know the class is thinking of them. If students in your class knew the person who died, they could share memories of that person.

5. Provide flexibility and support to your grieving student upon his or her return to class.

Recognize that your student will have difficulty concentrating and focusing on school work. Allow the bereaved student to leave the class when she needs some quiet or alone time. Make sure that the student has a person available to talk with, such as a school counselor.

DOs and DON'Ts with Grieving Students

- **DO listen. Grieving students need a safe, trusted adult who will listen to them**
- **DO follow routines. Routines provide a sense of safety which is very comforting to the grieving student.**
- **DO set limits. Just because students are grieving, doesn't mean that the rules do not apply. When grieving, students may experience lapses in concentration or exhibit risk taking behavior. Setting clear limits provides a more secure and safer environment for everyone under these circumstances.**
- **DO NOT suggest that the student has grieved long enough.**
- **DO NOT indicate that the student should get over it and move on.**
- **DO NOT act as if nothing has happened.**
- **DO NOT say things like:**
 - "It could be worse. You still have one brother."
 - "I know how you feel."
 - "You'll be stronger because of this."
- **DO NOT expect the student to complete all assignments on a timely basis.**

As a teacher, you have the opportunity to touch children's lives in a very special way. Your actions have a lifelong impact. When a death influences the lives of your students, you and your school, can make a life-long difference by creating an environment for healing and support.

For School Administrators:

The School Day After a school community has received news of a death, what happens on that day and the next day? How are schedules affected? Here's a general outline and some things to be aware of in the hours and early days after a death.

1. The staff briefing meeting

After the Crisis Response team has drafted their action plan, a briefing meeting with the staff should occur. It is important to have that meeting before the students return to school. All staff who are impacted by the crisis should be included in this meeting. Come to the meeting prepared to accomplish the following:

- **Share a written statement and presentation of the circumstances of the death.**
- **Prepare teachers to share the information in their home room or first period. (It is often helpful for a team of two people to present the information.)**
- **Present information about how students grieve and what behaviors might be expected. Review the plan for the school day/week.**
- **Stress the need for as routine a day as possible, allowing flexibility: times to talk about the death and its impact when students need such a discussion.**
- **Allow discussion of plan**
- **Address questions and concerns about high risk students with teachers/staff.**
- **Discuss the need for substitute teachers for those teachers who need to be away from students for a time because of their own reactions.**

- **Identify location and use of a safe room for students who need additional support throughout the day.**
- **Allow time for teachers to talk about their own feelings related to the death/incident.**
- **If applicable, inform teachers of the designated media spokesperson. Advise teachers not to speak with the media or allow them on the school grounds.**

2. Student Issues

As principal, you will have many opportunities to impact your students after a death occurs. Along with the Crisis Response Team, you will set out guidelines for teachers to facilitate classroom discussion, and inform students of resources available to them. You will also have opportunities to connect with students during the days and weeks following the death. It may be speaking in an assembly, in your office or in passing in the hall. One of the best things you can do is be a model for grieving, by acknowledging your own feelings around the loss. This helps create a safe and open atmosphere for grief. You can also allow students to play a role in memorializing the person who died. Planning a memorial service or remembrance can be a good activity for those who want to participate. Your school should have a policy around memorial services or other commemorations so that you are prepared in advance. The policy should include the answers to these questions:

- **Will our school provide the opportunity for our community to acknowledge the death of a student or staff member through some kind of memorialization? (We recommend that you do provide this opportunity, both to acknowledge the life of the person who died and also to illustrate the school's educational mission in action.)**
- **What kind of memorialization activities will we sponsor or support? (Some options include sponsoring a community open forum on an evening where parents, students and staff members are invited; holding a school assembly; allowing students to do something commemorative like plant a tree on school grounds; etc.)**

- **Under what circumstances will we consider memorialization activities? The death of a staff member or student? What if the death is from suicide, or a violent death? (We believe very strongly that whatever policy or precedent the school sets should apply to all deaths. For example, if you decide that if a student dies, there will be an opportunity to acknowledge that student's death publicly and collectively as a school community, you should do the same thing for a student who dies of suicide as you would for a basketball player who dies on the court, or a student who is killed in a car accident. It is not accurate that having a memorial for a student who dies of suicide will encourage other students to take their lives. Of course, memorial services should not glamorize or romanticize the act of suicide, but there are ways to memorialize without doing so. Not having the same activity you would provide in a different kind of death gives the message that the student's life was not valued, or that we should sweep suicide deaths under the rug. This is an excellent opportunity to educate your students, staff and school community about preventing suicide.)**