



# *School Grief Guide for Administrators & School Staff*

Region 15 Education Service Center



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# FORWARD

We live in a fast paced world today where “crisis” has become a common occurrence. Our reaction is often sadness and the human tendency of avoidance and suppression of our feelings—a hope that time will pass and with it the pain and the grief. Time does pass, and we can be lulled into believing that everything is fine. Unfortunately, all too often children’s and teens’ efforts to communicate intense feelings during times of crisis are minimized, denied, rationalized, or ignored. What experience has shown is that without the opportunity to express feelings, we may experience “unresolved grief.” In children unresolved grief manifests itself in many ways. We may see chronic complaints, frequent absences, a decline in academic performance, a reduction in self-esteem, depression, self-destructive behavior, and a lack of hope for the future. The development of this manual comes from a belief that grief is a process that contains various stages which individuals may respond to in their own way. When dealt with as a normal reaction to loss, grief can be seen as healthy and growth producing.

Special thanks should be given to the people from a number of organizations who have contributed their crisis intervention plans and traumatic event response plans for the development of this original document produced in 2002 and updated in 2021.

These agencies and organizations include:

- Dennis Macha, Region 6 Education Service Center
- Region 14 Education Service Center
- National Organization of Victims Assistance
- National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center (OH)
- Mississippi Bend Area Education Agency
- Loess Hills Area Education Agency (Council Bluffs, Iowa)
- Mississippi Bend Area Education Agency
- Area Education Agency 7, Area Education Agency 6, Iowa
- Keystone Area Education Agency
- Iowa State University Extension Service
- Suicide Prevention Resource Center
- U.S. Department of Education
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

This crisis response plan is intended to serve Region 15 school district administrators as a guide in a school-related crisis such as a student or faculty death, serious injury, suicide, epidemic or other catastrophes. It is recommended that every school district have a crisis event response plan in place within each school, either through the implementation of the Region 15 plan or the development of their own crisis intervention plan. A crisis response plan should also be reviewed annually by the principal and staff.

# THE USE OF THE SCHOOL PROTOCOL

This manual is designed to assist schools in developing a crisis management plan and in helping schools restore emotional health at the time of a traumatic event. Although this manual primarily focuses on the death of a student or staff member and its resulting trauma, it should be understood that other events may cause emotional shock and require a response to the crisis.

Principals, teachers, counselors, guidance staff, and other school staff members need to recognize that the days and weeks that follow the death of a student or teacher will be a time in which there is much turmoil and confusion. The amount of turmoil evidenced by the students and staff and the amount of confusion experienced by them will be a direct result of several variables. These variables include the popularity of the individual who died, the manner of death, the manner in which students learn about the death, and whether the death receives closure quickly, or a police investigation continues. Please recognize that individual variables will certainly have an effect on various aspects of intervention. These variables must be kept in mind as you work through the protocol with your students.

**IMPORTANT:** IF THE DEATH IS DUE TO SUICIDE PLEASE REVIEW [AFTER A SUICIDE TOOLKIT FOR SCHOOL](#) BEFORE USING THIS GUIDE.

# INTRODUCTION

When any individual within a school becomes aware of the death of a student or staff member via homicide, suicide, accidental death, or their death following an illness, it should be the responsibility of that individual to immediately call the principal and inform him/her of all the known facts regarding the death. At this point the principal must verify the fact that a death has occurred and do everything possible to ascertain the facts. Until the information is verified it is important that student or staff avoid rumors that create undue stress. Once the death has been officially confirmed, the principal will then contact the Region 15 ESC Executive Director or Counselor Support Specialist who will notify the Crisis Response Team.

If the death is discovered outside of school hours, in the evening or late at night, the principal should notify the faculty. During the principal's call to the faculty, staff will be informed that there will a change in the procedure of the normal school day and a time will be established for all staff to meet prior to the start of school.

## COMPOSITION OF THE BUILDING CRISIS RESPONSE TEAM

Members of the Building Crisis Response Team to be present at the next day meetings might include:

- Crisis Response Team members assigned to the school
- Region 15 ESC staff assigned to the school
- Other professionals and clergy from the community.
- A prearranged method of notifying all team members needs to be formalized in advance in order to allow team members maximum preparation time.

**(Updated yearly)**

## AGENCY CONTACT

The principal, or designee, should contact the local mental health center, notify them of the death/suicide, and inform them of the possibility that referrals may increase from the school. First responders such as police, highway patrol, paramedic, hospital staff and fire chief can be good resources and early warnings for grief needs. Community members such as county judge, justice of the peace, and funeral directors can help provide needed information. Community agencies that may have been involved with the student or family, i.e., Social Services or other involved private service providers, should also be notified and may provide additional support for the family. A list of community agencies and referral sources needs to be developed prior to any event for distribution to the Crisis Response Team members and staff.

# IMMEDIATE ACTION TO BE TAKEN

- **IMPORTANT:** IF THE DEATH IS DUE TO SUICIDE PLEASE REVIEW [AFTER A SUICIDE TOOLKIT FOR SCHOOL](#) BEFORE USING THIS GUIDE.
- Superintendent or designee will **VERIFY** information.
- Notify appropriate administrators.
- Notify the Counselor.
- Activate the School-based Crisis Response Team.
- Notify other campus administrators in the district, especially if they have sibling or relatives of the deceased at their campus.
- Determine if outside assistance is needed. If so, call the Region 15 ESC Executive Director at 325-658-6571 (casey.callahan@esc15.net) to request assistance.
- Region 15 ESC CRT Leader, Carol Stevens, can be reached at 325-658-6571 (carol.stevens@esc15.net).

## SUPERINTENDENT'S ROLE

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### Step #1

- Have the student's building principal inform the superintendent as soon as possible.
  - Ask what requests the building principal may have in order to best be able to respond to this traumatic event.
  - The Superintendent informs, as necessary, other building principals and district staff (including bus drivers).
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### Step #2

Brief the secretary in handling calls and requests for information. Give them a prepared announcement. [GRIEF ANNOUNCEMENTS](#)

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### Step #3

Act as a contact person to the media or designate a person to act in that capacity. [MEDIA](#)

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### Step #4

When appropriate, extend condolences to the immediate family and provide appropriate representation at services.

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### Step #5

Keep school board members up-to-date and involved as needed.

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### Step #6

Monitor intervention process.

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# PRINCIPAL'S CHECKLIST

- Verified factual information with the appropriate authorities.
- Called Region 15 ESC CRT Leader, Carol Stevens, at 325-658-6571 to organize counselors and grief response to arrange a meeting with the Crisis Response Team before school.
- Phone tree to staff to set a meeting in the morning for all staff.
- Instructed a staff member to remove locker contents from deceased student's locker(s).
- Worked up a fact sheet regarding the death to be presented to the building staff. Composed an announcement to the students. [GRIEF ANNOUNCEMENTS](#)
- Held a before school staff meeting.
- Designated a counseling support center in the building. [GRIEF SUPPORT CENTER](#)
- Directed staff member to be the point of contact with the family to have all questions a support be coordinated.
- Directed staff member to review student's cumulative folder and notified other school principals as needed. Directed a staff member to remove student's name from all mailing lists, including the district's central office.
- Designated a staff member to collect funeral arrangement information. Contacted clergy or funeral director who will be conducting funeral services.
- Visited parents of the deceased.
- Composed a letter that was sent home to parents to inform them of the death and how the school cared for their students today. Included funeral information that was available or let them know that future letter will contain that information. [GRIEF LETTERS](#)
- Held after-school staff meeting.
- Met with Crisis Response Team at end of the day to review day's activities, reviewed list of "at risk" students and planned for the next day's activities.
- Made an announcement the day after the funeral to formally end public grief support. [GRIEF ANNOUNCEMENTS](#)

# PRINCIPAL'S GRIEF RESPONSE PLAN

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## Step #1

Verify the death by talking directly to the family, first responders, hospital, justice of the peace, or county judge. Do not activate a grief response plan without verifying the death.

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## Step #2

- Call the Region 15 ESC Executive Director at 325-658-6571 (casey.callahan@esc15.net) to request assistance.
  - Call the Region 15 ESC CRT Leader, Carol Stevens at 325-658-6571 (carol.stevens@esc15.net) to line-up counselors and grief response.
  - Call your Counselor(s) and or Crisis Response Team for your building.
  - Call your Ministerial Alliance, local clergy or local youth ministers.
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## Step #3

Call a staff meeting for before school the next morning. **Do not** notify of a death by text, automated call system, or email. Use your staff phone tree to notify your staff. If a voice mail must be left then a message notifying them of the staff meeting and asking them to call back is recommended. ***“The principal has called a mandatory staff meeting for tomorrow morning at 7:00 am. Please call me back so I can let you know of the reason.”***

These procedures will allow teachers the necessary time to deal with their own feelings so they are in a better position to help students. This call also informs the staff there will be a meeting before school the next day.

Be sensitive to staff members who might need special support. [GRIEF IMPACT FORM](#)

- They were close to the deceased.
- They recently had to discipline or had other issues with the student.
- They have recently experienced a death personally in their family.

Principals should also be prepared to call in substitutes for teachers who are on the crisis response team or need time out of their classroom to compose themselves.

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## Step #4

Direct a staff member to immediately go to the deceased student's locker(s) (hallway, locker room, band hall...), remove the contents, and bring the belongings to the principal. This needs to be completed prior to the students coming to school since in some instances students may remove the deceased's property, which rightfully belongs to the parents.



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### Step #5

Prepare an announcement to be read to the students. [GRIEF ANNOUNCEMENTS](#) The most effective system of delivery is having teachers read the announcement to their class. Crisis team members can assist teachers who may have difficulty reading the message. Loudspeaker announcement can be used but often feel impersonal and uncaring. Assembly type gatherings are **not** recommended. **Note:** *It is important to have a central spokesperson for all announcements to students. By the time students reach school following a death or suicide; many will have heard differing versions about what happened. The presence of a strong, caring, and supportive authority figure (i.e., the principal) sharing information during this stressful time is important.*

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### Step #6

Faculty Meeting before School

#### Purpose

- Introduce Grief Team
- Facts of the traumatic death.
- Agenda for the day.
- Agenda for faculty and an informational sheet on the death.
- Announcement to students.
- Review best ways to respond to the death [GRIEF INFORMATION](#)
- Sensitivity of staff members.

Administrator or grief counselor may follow the student's schedule. [GRIEF IMPACT FORM](#)

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### Step #7

Identify a [Support Center](#) area in the building where students may come for support and counseling. In some instances, more than one room should be made available to accommodate additional students. It is more effective to keep groups relatively small. Usually the support area should be close to the guidance office or the main office to facilitate communications between guidance and administrative staff. Libraries or empty classrooms are often used.

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### Step #8

Assign **one staff member** to be the **point of contact with the family**. Remind all staff members that only one person from the district should be in contact with the family. A family can be overwhelmed with care and concern when several people call and offer help or ask the same questions over and over.

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### Step #9

Direct a staff member to pull the deceased student's cumulative folder to determine what other schools the deceased attended. The principal should call the other school(s) and inform them of the event that has occurred.

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### Step #10

Direct a staff member to collect funeral arrangement information and to prepare details for student/faculty attendance at the visitation and funeral [GRIEF LETTERS](#). When details are final, announcement should be made to staff and students. **Note:** *It may be important to have faculty members present during the entire visitation period to assist the funeral director in handling distraught children and teens.* Designate one secretary who will know how to reach the principal throughout the day, so that the principal can respond to any emergency/administrative situations that may develop.

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### Step #11

Call and/or visit the parents as early as possible to express the schools and your condolences. Visiting the parents is highly encouraged, and the principal should take along a staff member who has been well acquainted with the student. Inform the parents that the Grief Response Team would be available to meet with the parents within the home if they wish to discuss any questions or concerns.

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### Step #12

Send a letter home with students describing the loss, how it was handled at school, and what parents can do to help their child. If possible include funeral and visitation information. If this information is not known at this time state in the letter that information will be sent by letter or call out later. [GRIEF LETTERS](#)

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### Step #13

Meet with staff briefly to review the day's events, identify students that may have further needs or were not present, make any announcements that are needed for the next few days. Thank your staff for their efforts.

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### Step #14

Following the funeral, begin to bring closure by encouraging teachers to resume regular classroom activities as quickly as is appropriate. On the day following the funeral, the principal should consider making the following [closure statement](#) to all students and faculty (this is done the day following because many of the deceased student's closest friends will not have returned to school the day of the funeral): **May I have your attention please. I wish to thank each of you, students and faculty, for the support you have shown each other during the past few days. The example you have shown is a positive and healthy one and provides us the opportunity to work together toward strengthening our relationships to each other. Guidance staff remains available if you should wish to talk with a counselor. (Any additional comments from the family that have been passed on to the principal might be shared at this point.) Thank you for your attention.**

## Follow-up

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### Step #1

Within two weeks following the funeral, meet with the **Grief Management Team** and debrief actions taken. Two key questions are addressed: What worked well in dealing with this event, and what could be improved?

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### Step #2

Modify the building protocol based upon feedback of crises management team and others. Provide changes in the protocol to any district level planning group.

## School Counselor Check List

- Verified the death and notified your principal and superintendents.
- Completed a [GRIEF IMPACT FORM](#)
- Called Region 15 ESC CRT Leader, Carol Stevens, at 325-658-6571 to line up counselors and grief response.
- Called your ministerial alliance or local pastors and youth ministers.
- Set up a grief [SUPPORT CENTER](#).
- Assisted with calling staff and preparation for before school staff meeting.
- Prepared [GRIEF ACTIVITIES](#) for staff.
- Assisted grief response team with helping school and [GRIEF DEBRIEF PROTOCOL](#).
- Followed up with staff and students in need.
- Assisted with visitation and funeral service as needed.
- Assisted with memorialization ideas that meet the district policies.
- Counseled or provide referrals to those with individual needs when identified.

# SCHOOL COUNSELOR'S GRIEF RESPONSE PLAN

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## Step #1

- Call the Region 15 ESC Executive Director at 325-658-6571 to request assistance.
- Call the Region 15 ESC CRT Leader, Carol Stevens, can be reached at 325-658-6571 to line up counselors and grief response.
- Call your Counselor(s) and or Crisis Response Team for your building.
- Call your Ministerial Alliance, local clergy or youth ministers.

## Step #2

Identify a [SUPPORT CENTER](#) area in the building where students may come for support and counseling. In some instances, more than one room should be made available to accommodate additional students. It is more effective to keep groups relatively small. Usually the support area should be close to the guidance office or the main office to facilitate communications between guidance and administrative staff. Libraries or empty classrooms are often used.

## Step #3

Identify key students, staff, and groups you feel will be impacted or need special support. Identify, especially after a student suicide or other violent death, the deceased student's close friends or friendship groups (e.g. sports teams, clubs). Make contact with these students and/or their parents. [GRIEF IMPACT FORM](#)

## Step #4

Help with the faculty meeting before school:

Introduce the grief team, review best ways to respond to death, let staff know of the support center and how students and staff can best use it effectively. See who may need special support.

## Step #5

Provide group grief activities to help support teachers and students moving from the announcement of the death and return to basic school work and normal routine. [GRIEF ACTIVITIES](#)

## Step #6

Assign staff member to classroom where assistance by the teacher has been requested. Follow the students schedule and provide [GRIEF DEBRIEF PROTOCOL](#)

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**Step #7**

Work closely with the Grief Response Team to identify and coordinate personnel who can work with groups or individuals. Region 15's Crisis Response Team is responsible for assisting in the implementation of a response plan when called upon for any grief need that may affect the school. Region 15's Crisis Response Team will be available to provide the following services:

- Work with the principal and counselor as a resource for information on coping with a traumatic event.
- Be available at the before-school meeting for input and introductions.
- Serve as a resource to teachers who may need assistance on conducting their classroom discussions or have questions of their own.
- Work with small group counseling when appropriate.
- Work individually with students and staff.
- Identify high-risk students/staff that may need immediate support.
- Facilitate a debriefing for the staff and students as needed.

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**Step #8**

Make follow-up calls to parents of students in distress and make recommendations for the parent to provide support.

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**Step #9**

- Follow up with students most closely affected by the event. [GRIEF IMPACT FORM](#)
- Follow up with staff members most closely affected by the event. [GRIEF IMPACT FORM](#)
- Check with families most closely affected by the event. Refer to community counseling agencies as needed.

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**Step #10**

Organize school staff support for the visitation and funeral. Check with the funeral director and pastor to see the families' wishes for the level of student attendance and or participation. Make suggestions of support and guidance.

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**Step #11**

Follow district policy for [MEMORIALS](#).

# ROLE OF NON-CERTIFIED STAFF

All building personnel are affected by the death of a student. Therefore, it is important to inform non-certified staff of their role in dealing with this tragic event.

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## Step #1

All non-certified staff should attend the mandatory staff meeting to be informed of the death and the plans for the day.

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## Step #2

Secretarial staff should review procedures for handling requests or calls from parents, news media, and others.

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## Step #3

Non-certified support staff should give the names of any students they are concerned about to the principal who can then refer the names to counselors and the Grief Response Team.

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## Step #4

Pull the deceased students records. Make sure the deceased student is taken off any automatic notification calls, letters, emails, and other notifications. Remember cafeteria, progress reports and report cards, class trips, extracurricular...



# Faculty Checklist

Attend the staff meeting. Read the grief announcement and review checklist.

- Attended the staff meet before school.
- Read the [GRIEF CLASSROOM DISCUSSION , DEVELOPMENTAL GRIEF RESPONSE, GRIEF ACTIVITIES](#)
- Made sure I could care for my students and asked for assistance and support from the counselor and grief response team as it was needed.
- Identified student in need of the assistance and referred them to the Grief Support Center, see [GRIEF REACTIONS](#)
- Attended the staff meeting after school.

## Faculty Responsibilities

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### Step #1

Attend All Staff faculty meeting in the morning. Read the announcements and other information. If you have specific concerns or questions, let your counselor know as soon as possible. [GRIEF ANNOUCEMENTS](#)

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### Step #2

- Provide an opportunity for students to discuss the crisis, stages of grief, sharing of loss, and what they have learned. [GRIEF CLASSROOM DISCUSSION](#)
  - Depending on the nature of the event/death, discuss private versus public information.
  - DO NOT RUSH STUDENTS THROUGH THIS PROCESS. Allow them to talk and express their disbelief. Teachers should remember that they are “defusing” the event. [DEVELOPMENTAL GRIEF RESPONSE](#)
  - Ask the counselor for support if needed.
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### Step #3

Do a group grief activity to help support students moving from the announcement of the death and return to basic school work and normal routine. [GRIEF ACTIVITIES](#)

Shorten and structure assignments. Postpone and reschedule tests as needed.

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### Step #4

Identify students who were close friends or students who would like an opportunity to attend a group or individual counseling session

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**Step #5**

Identify students obviously in distress and talk with them or have another student escort them to a group or individual counseling session.

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**Step #6**

If a class has a large number of distressed students, notify the counselor or a member of the Regional 15 Crisis Response Team for assistance.

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**Step #7**

If students are restless, get them active and focused on a project for the family such as books, letters, pictures, or other group grief activities. [GRIEF ACTIVITIES](#)

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**Step #8**

Encourage a support network in school with peer counselors or team/club members. Maintain on-going communication with the counselor during and after the crisis. Refer students to the school counselor for individual attention.

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**Step #8**

Attend the after school staff meeting. Review the day and identify needs and strategies for the days to come

## Specific Information for Elementary Teachers

The response of a young child to the death of a significant person may vary depending upon the personal, family, and social factors. The grieving process does not always have discernible stages as observed in adolescents or adults.

Such factors as the closeness of the relationship, the time of preparation for the death, and the family's response to the death may influence the nature, duration, and severity of the grief response.

After the loss of a loved one, the child may be reluctant to trust others, especially adults, for fear they too will die or go away. This confounds the teacher's role in supporting the student.

There are a variety of responses to death and they often hide the child's true feelings.

- The child may behave as if nothing is really wrong, hoping that they can convince themselves that death is a reversible process and the deceased will return.
- Often the signs are physical or behavioral in nature, including: crying, clinging, and thumb sucking.
- Other signs of bodily distress might include: chronic worrying, lack of energy, and loss of appetite.

- The child may also demonstrate hostile reactions or there may be a looking to others or substituting that is designed to satisfy some physical or emotional need.
- There may be an idealizing of the individual during the initial response.
- Perhaps the most powerful response of young children to death is one of guilt. There may be concern that they have done something to cause the death or should have been more helpful while the person was alive.

The teacher can be very helpful to the young child by giving him/her accurate information in simple and understandable words. The information shared should be guided by the child's questions and should avoid the use of phrases such as "going on a long trip" or "going to sleep". By supporting the child's expressions of feeling in a caring manner, the teacher prepares the child for later grief events. If possible, it is helpful to young children to use such experiences as the loss of a pet to begin to acquire the skills necessary to get through the death of a person to whom they are acquainted. [GRIEF REACTIONS](#)

# Grief Classroom Discussion Guide for Teachers

Refer students to the school counselor for individual attention.

## 1. Introduction

This is very difficult for us all. It is not easy to know what to say or how to act. Sometimes our own reactions frighten us because they are so new to us and seem so strong.

If someone assists in the classroom presentation, they might say that *we are here with your teacher to talk about \_\_\_\_\_, to answer questions if we can and to tell you of some of the reactions you may have that are normal.*

## 2. Beginning

This is what we know so far: READ THE FACT SHEET OR ANNOUNCEMENT FROM THE MORNING FACULTY MEETING

- A. Did any of you play/spend time with or have conversations with \_\_\_\_\_ in the past couple of weeks? Tell us about that. What do you remember?
- B. Have any of you had a similar incident happen to a family member or friend? What upsets you most about \_\_\_\_\_'s (death, murder, injury, etc.)?
- C. What questions do you have about what happened or even about what will be happening over the next few days?

## 3. Normalizing

Let us discuss the kinds of reactions that most people have following this kind of situation. Examples: shock, anger, fear, sadness, hurt, frustration. What do people do with those reactions? What does it look like? You may already have experienced some of these reactions or you may experience them weeks, even months, from now. They are very normal reactions so do not be alarmed. It will help, however, if you talk to someone about them. Let's identify some people you can talk to.

## 4. Identifying Appropriate Behavior

This will vary somewhat depending on the incident. If the incident is suicide see AFTER A SUICIDE TOOL KIT FOR SCHOOLS. If the incident is murder, students need to hear messages against revenge, etc.

This is a time when it is not unusual for us to look for reasons why this happened. A lot of rumors that are not at all helpful to the family or to close friends can get started. If you hear stories that are different from the information we give you, please let us know so we can check them out, correct them, or confirm them.

Sometimes we want to blame others. This is normal but not something we want to do. It simply doesn't help and can, in fact, cause the person or persons being blamed to retaliate (want to fight back) and that doesn't help anyone. Although it is very normal to be angry, it is not acceptable to seek revenge on those we think may be the cause of \_\_\_\_\_'s death. We simply will not accept anyone going after anyone else.

## 5. Conclusion

Are there any other questions that we need to answer or discuss today? Is there something you would like to do to honor \_\_\_\_\_?

**Notes and Assurances**

- A. Be prepared for silence.
- B. If students do not respond to your initial questions, ask and then answer the questions you anticipate students might ask.
- C. You may wish to express your own reactions initially, this sometimes give students “permission” to open up also.
- D. Inform students of related activities that are planned over the next days. Keep them informed of new information and upcoming activities.
- E. It is recommended that classroom presentations be conducted by school-based staff. Children in crisis look to their counselors, teachers, administrators, and other school-based staff for protection and help. Using outside sources frequently angers students, distances them from staff, and “chips away” at their trust in staff.

# Grief Activities to do with Students

Often after the announcement is made of the death of a student a teachers is faced with a classroom of students who will be in shock (quiet and staring off in space), sad (crying and hugging on each other), angry (mad at the person who died, who they feel caused their death, or those who are not grieving the right way), or no emotion because they did not know the person or are not ready to deal with their own emotions. After talking about your own reaction of grief and talking about normal grief reaction teachers are not sure what to do especially when students are not talking. Here are some activities that may help.

When you present these activities it is important to offer them as a choice and not force a student to do them. These activities are to help students to grieve and will not help if a student is made to feel guilt and shame for not participating.

## **Drawing, letter writing, and other activities.**

Often students don't have words to convey how they feel. Drawing, writing, and other artistic activities can help them get emotions out and provide a bridge to talking about emotions that are confusing, scary, and difficult to express.

### **Memory chains:**

Materials: different colored paper cut into 2" by 10" strips, colored pens, pencils, and tape

Activity: Ask students to write or draw a favorite memory of the person who died, something they will miss about them, or a kind word to the family of the person who died. Take paper strip and make a loop taping one end to the other. Link the loops together making a paper chain of memories. These can be left up for a few days and then given to the family before the funeral.

### **I liked, I will miss, my favorite time with you was:**

Materials: different colored paper, pens, pencils

Activity: Pass out paper with the writing stems I liked: I will miss: and My favorite time with you was: pre-printed on the paper or written on the board or overhead. Allow students to fill in their answers either by writing or drawing. If someone finishes early encourage them to decorate their paper. The papers can be collected and delivered to the family of the person who died.

### **Letters to the person who died:**

Materials: note cards or notebook paper, pens, and pencils

Activity: Ask students to write a letter to the person who died saying anything they need or would have liked to be able to tell them before they died. This activity is helpful for sudden deaths. Students can keep these letters if they wish.



### Letter to the family:

Materials: different colored paper, pens, pencils

Activity: Ask student to write a letter to the family. This outline is from Dr. Ron Wolfson book "A Time to Mourn, a Time to Comfort: A Guide to Jewish Bereavement."

- **Acknowledge the loss and name of the deceased.** Using the name of the deceased is a tribute that comforts most mourners.
- **Express your sympathy.** Let the bereaved know your sadness. This will remind the bereaved they are not alone in their suffering.
- **Note special qualities of the deceased.** Acknowledge those characteristics that you cherished most about the person who has died.
- **Recall a memory about the deceased.** Talk about how the deceased touched your life. Use humor-the funny stories are often the most appreciated by the bereaved.
- **Remind the bereaved of their personal strengths.** By reminding the bereaved of the qualities they possess that will help them through this period, you reinforce their ability to cope. If you can recall something the deceased used to say about the mourner in this regard, you will really be giving your friend a gift.
- **Offer help, but be specific.** "If there is anything I can do, please call" actually puts a burden on those in grief who may be totally at a loss about what needs to be done. A definite offer to help with shopping, the kids, volunteer work, or whatever is more appreciated. Then, do it-don't make an offer you can't fulfill.
- **End with a word or phrase or sympathy.** "You are in my thoughts and prayers.", "Our love is with you always.", "We share in your grief and send you our love.", "My affectionate respects to you and yours."

### Memory Wall:

Materials: butcher paper, tape, pens

Activity: Put up the butcher paper on the wall near the quiet room. A statement like "We will miss you [Name of the Deceased]" or "We will never forget you [Name of the deceased]" can be written at the top of the paper. Post a counselor or teacher with pens and have them tell students to write a message, thought, feeling, or memory on the wall. Remind the students that the family will be receiving this when it is done. This can be left up until the funeral. When the parent come to pick up the content of the locker you can show them the paper. Ask them if they would like to take the paper with them or would they like it brought to the memorial or funeral. Honor the family's wishes.

# Grief Social Circles Impact Form

Name of the Deceased: \_\_\_\_\_

Names of Family Members: Parents/Guardians: \_\_\_\_\_

Sibling: \_\_\_\_\_ School they Attend: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Sibling: \_\_\_\_\_ School they Attend: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Sibling: \_\_\_\_\_ School they Attend: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Sibling: \_\_\_\_\_ School they Attend: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Sibling: \_\_\_\_\_ School they Attend: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

Eyewitnesses or those present during the accident, trauma, or death:

\_\_\_\_\_

Boyfriend/Girlfriend: \_\_\_\_\_

Close friends: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Former and current close teachers and staff: \_\_\_\_\_

Class Schedule:

1<sup>st</sup> Period: \_\_\_\_\_

2<sup>nd</sup> Period: \_\_\_\_\_

3<sup>rd</sup> Period: \_\_\_\_\_

4<sup>th</sup> Period: \_\_\_\_\_

5<sup>th</sup> Period: \_\_\_\_\_

6<sup>th</sup> Period: \_\_\_\_\_

7<sup>th</sup> Period: \_\_\_\_\_

Teams/Groups/Clubs: \_\_\_\_\_

Students with recent loss or perceived needs: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

# **Guidelines for Managing the Support Center**

**Offer the Support Center all day the first day that news of a death is disseminated.**

**More than one counselor/facilitator is needed in each support group; it is also a good idea to have others available for relief purposes. Co-facilitating is especially critical to maintain continuity for the purpose of identifying high risk students and for general support and help.**

**You will need:**

- **Library or other private area that will accommodate 4-6 table groups of 4-5 students and a grief facilitator can work**
- **Sign-in sheet or other way to track what student use grief services and how many times they used it. It also allows you to know who did not use the service that may need help**
- **Kleenex, pens, pencils, paper, paper chains, stuffed animals, stress balls, playdough, clay, or other play therapy and self-care items**
- **Grief Group Activities**
- **Water and/or snacks if possible. Many people who cry or have strong emotions need hydration and a small snack to avoid nausea and headache**

**Focus:**

- **Memories, positive experiences with a person who died**
- **Feelings about loss**
- **Stages of grieving (grief education)—students may bring-up spirituality**
- **Funeral and services—for appropriate ages**
- **Future—what next? Focus conversations on positive coping now and in the future**
- **Guilt work if needed (some may focus on causation)**
- **Family and friend’s responses (kids often wonder “What can I do? How can I help?”)**
- **Identifying others that the students are concerned about (provides them with an opportunity to help, gives them a purpose in a crisis, and allows them to be part of a larger supportive community response)**

**Avoid:**

- **Constant talk about details of the death**
- **Blame—this causes pain to those who may already be suffering a tremendous amount of guilt. The blame may also be inaccurate**
- **If you have member providing pastoral counseling, remind them to check-in and respect the student regarding their religious beliefs. This is not the time to add to a youth group or convince someone of their spiritual beliefs. Ministerial members can be helpful in answering students' questions about God, but caution is recommended when answering questions regarding why someone died and questions about an afterlife - this is not the time to explore the role of morality in cause of death (esp. re: suicide) and there is a great amount of diversity in religious belief.**

**Remember: throughout the course of the group process, facilitators need to identify students with suicidal thoughts or thoughts of self-harm (regardless of the cause of the death) and assess whether or not these children could benefit from professional help.**

**IN THE EVENT OF SUICIDAL IDEATION, THE STUDENT MUST BE ASSESSED AND REFERRED FOR ASSISTANCE FROM A LICENSED MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL SAME-DAY. A safety plan should be explored with the student of concern and reviewed routinely.**

# GRIEF DEBRIEF PROTOCOL

## Introduction (Safety & Security)

- Offer your condolences
- Introduce team members/local caregivers
- Defines ground rules:
  - Confidentiality
  - Support Center rules/function
  - Express your reactions respectfully (no verbal or physical violence)
  - Not required to identify selves or to speak/"Right to Pass"
  - Respect others viewpoints
- Describe agenda: explore how people/families reacted or are reacting; coping in future
- Logistics:bathrooms, accessing individual emotional support

## Helpful conversations:

- How did you find out?
- What do you know about this situation?
- How would you describe what you're feeling?
- Can you tell me about [person who died]? What were they like?
- What will you miss about them?
- What is your favorite memory of [the person]?
- Focus on supportive others available
- Identify staff who can help student cope long-term
- After all you've been through, what do you think will happen in the next few days or weeks (...in your job, ...at home)?
- Do you think your family has been/will continue to be affected? Do you have any practical concerns about what will happen next?
- How do you think you will deal with the concerns you have raised?
  - (Explore coping strategies, information seeking, problem-solving)
- Suggest referrals, provide information on follow-up support.

## Conclusion/Education

- Provide education on normal grief reactions
- Discuss positive vs. negative coping strategies
- Provide list of resources for ongoing support
- Evaluate need for licensed professional help as necessary and refer
- Notify helpful staff identified by the student for ongoing support

# GRIEF ANNOUNCEMENTS

**Important-** For a death by suicide please refer to [AFTER A SUICIDE TOOLKIT FOR SCHOOL](#)

Announcements are best made by the teacher or trusted adult in the classroom with a printed fact sheets and announcements. Depending on the relationship or level of need by the teacher a counselor or principal can make the announcement in the classroom.

Announcements over the intercom are not recommended. If an announcement must be made over the loud speaker then:

- Use a calm, even voice tone. Stress can be detected by listening to voice inflections.
- Do not give too many details. It is hard for students and adults to listen to an intercom system and remember all the details. This will lead to speculation and rumors. It would be better to make a short announcement and send a memo or fact sheet with more details. Announcements should not be made in large assemblies. If it is not possible for announcements to be made in the classroom or over a loud speaker then assembly groups no larger than 50 students broken by grade level with ample staff support present is suggested. Be prepared for contagious grief, rumors, students leaving school, and other difficult expression of grief to occur. Be prepared to guide students to grief support center.

## Sample Announcements

“We were deeply saddened to receive news of the death of one of our students, (**Name**), who was a sophomore this year. (**Name**) died in a car accident last night at (**Street**), first responders did all they could, but **he/she** died. His funeral services will be held (**Date, Time, and Location**). (**Name**) was involved in music and the visual arts at (**School**). Our thoughts are with (**Name**)’s family and friends.

All of us at (**School**) care deeply for our students and always encourage you to make good choices that will help keep you safe.

A support center has been set up in the Library. As always, school counselors, and other counselors from the area, are willing to visit with students who are impacted by this event, whether because you know (**Name**) and his friends, or because this brings up memories of other events in your life.”

“Students, may I have your attention please. Last night (**student’s name**), from our junior class, died. This morning the faculty met to help with a coping plan for this event. Your teacher has been given some suggestions on how to proceed with classroom activities today. Additionally, there will be special counseling available for any student who feels the need for some extra support. Counselors will be available in (**give location**) all day.

At any time during the day, please let your teacher know if you wish to see a counselor. We are all affected by this loss. Staff and students here are known to be caring. Today, I encourage all of you to be aware of your own feelings and be respectful of the feelings of others. We are in contact with the family and when we know the details and the family’s wishes for visitation and the funeral we will let you know by announcement and letter. Our thoughts go out to the family and friends of (**student’s name**).”



May I have your attention, please? We have just been advised of a tragedy involving a member of our school community. I am sad to announce that **NAME** has **TYPE OF CRISIS SITUATION**. As soon as we have more information, we will pass it on to you. People will be available in the building to help those of you who need extra support in dealing with this situation. Your teachers will advise you of the location and times available for this support. As soon as we know the family's wishes regarding this situation, we will share that information with you. We ask that all students remain in their classrooms and adhere to their regular schedules."

- You may want to announce for teachers to have a moment of silence for students to collect their thoughts. Teachers should reinforce the announcement and reassure students, instead of jumping right back into a lesson or activities. Teachers may need to drop their regularly scheduled activities and use recovery techniques, such as writing about the situation, or writing encouraging notes and making cards for the affected families.

"May I have your attention, please? [PAUSE] As many of you are aware, we were sorry to hear that **NAME**, a **STUDENT/TEACHER/OTHER** at our school, died **WHEN** from **WHAT**. First Responders on the scene and at the hospital did everything they could, but **STUDENT/TEACHER/OTHER** died. The funeral arrangements have not been completed. As soon as we learn the funeral plans, we will announce them in class. Those of you who want to talk about your feelings during this time should obtain a hall pass from your teacher to go to the **DESIGNATED COUNSELING PLACE**. This help will be available throughout the school day. Let us have a moment of silence... Thank you for your cooperation today. During this class period, students may not leave class without a pass, and even then only for urgent needs. Please be considerate of one another during this time. Remember rumor, gossip, and social media does nothing to help our school, our community, and the family, Thank you."

- As soon as possible, if not already completed at a staff meeting, send a fact sheet or memo to all faculty and staff.
- Before a class period change, initiate a follow-up announcement. If there are additional details to be clarified, do so at this time, but keep the announcement concise.

# Special Grief Announcements

## **ANNOUNCEMENTS AFTER THE SCHOOL DAY STARTS**

When an announcement must be made after classes have begun, crisis team members should go in pairs to each classroom. One of the team members should take over the class while the regular teacher is given the “bad news” in private. After the classroom teacher has regained his/her composure, the teacher should return to the classroom and make the announcement. Additional staff from feeder schools, district office, or substitutes may be needed.

## **ANNOUNCEMENTS FOR THE DAY AFTER THE FUNERAL**

May I have your attention please? I wish to thank each of you, students and faculty, for the support you have shown each other during the past few days. The example you have shown is a positive and healthy one and provides us the opportunity to work together toward strengthening our relationships to each other. Guidance staff remains available if you should wish to talk with a counselor. (Any additional comments from the family that have been passed on to the principal might be shared at this point.) Thank you for your attention.

# SAMPLE LETTERS

**Important-** For a death by suicide please refer to [AFTER A SUICIDE TOOLKIT FOR SCHOOL](#)

Sample Letter to Parents DEATH OF A STUDENT – OFF CAMPUS

(DATE)

Dear (School) Parents:

We want to inform you that a member of the (Last Name) family and a classmate of your child died (time, day, date, place) after a (brief cause: fire, household accident, car crash, etc.). The student, (STUDENTS Name), was a (grade level) this year.

Our staff informed your child's class of this loss. Hopefully, they have encouraged ways for classmates to cope with the death. However, we want you to be informed so that you, too, can help your child.

Your concern for the family at this time will be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

SAMPLE PARENT LETTER: STUDENT DEATH

Date

Dear Parent/Caregiver,

All of us at (**School**) were saddened to receive news this morning of the death of (**Name**), one of our 7th graders. The Region 15 ESC Crisis Response Team is assisting us in helping students deal with this news.

We all react in individual ways to this type of event. Things such as developmental level, our relationships with the people impacted, our previous experiences of loss, and our personal perceptions of death impact how we deal with this event. The most important things we should do is be supportive and encourage discussion about the events, our feelings, and what we can do in response to it.

We encourage you as parents and caregivers to read over the following list of ways you can help your student deal with these events and to use them as you feel appropriate.

What Can You Do as a Parent?

- Be available and willing to discuss the events and honestly share your feelings about them.
- Allow your student to express fears and feelings. Let them question without being judgmental.
- Maintain your daily routines as it offers students a sense of security.
- Be present and watchful of your student in the days and weeks ahead. Watch for any changes in behavior. If you do notice changes, talk them over with a school counselor.
- Give assurance of love, support, and safety.
- Be patient. Students may express a variety of emotions within a short period of time.

The school counselors will be available in the days and weeks ahead. Please let us know how we can be of assistance to you and your family.

(Add funeral arrangements if known) Sincerely,

## SAMPLE PARENT LETTER

Dear Parent(s) or Guardian:

It is with sadness that I inform you of the death of **(Students Name)**, a sophomore in our school. **(Students name)** died from injuries suffered in a car accident, which occurred last evening (do not specify reason if death by suicide or causes which are unknown, etc.).

The funeral will be held at (Funeral Home or Church)\_\_\_\_\_at\_\_\_\_a.m./p.m. Visitation will be held at (Funeral Home)\_\_\_\_\_during the hours of \_\_\_\_\_to\_\_\_\_. Parents, if your student wishes to attend the funeral, you will need to come to school and check them out. We strongly encourage parents to attend the funeral with their child.

(Note: Send a letter home to parents even if you do not know the details of the funeral arrangements. You can state, "We currently do not have information concerning the funeral arrangements. As soon as we know the families wishes we will let you know by letter or announcement.")

Students will have varied reactions to the death of a peer. Any reaction is normal in the grief process and can range from withdrawal, to crying and anger. I encourage you to openly discuss with your child their reactions and feelings regarding the death of **(Students Name)**.

Special counseling services have been made available to students today and will continue to be available till the funeral.

If you think your child needs additional counseling support, please do not hesitate to contact the (School Counseling Office)\_\_\_at (phone number)\_\_\_\_\_.

Sincerely, Principal and Staff

## Sample Letters to Parents

Dear Parent:

As you may be aware, our school district has experienced a death of a **(student/faculty member)** that has affected us deeply.

The students and staff will react in different ways to the death of one of our school community members. We all should expect and try to understand that there will be a variety of emotions and responses to what has occurred. The most important thing we can do is to be supportive and encourage an open expression of feelings.

At the school, we have implemented a plan for responding to this tragic event focused on helping our students and their families get back to regular learning and every day activities as soon as possible. This plan has evolved from the district's experience with death in the past and the advice of mental health professionals from the community and Region 15 ESC. Our teachers and counselors have been briefed on our plans and have received guidelines for discuss death and reactions to it. **Continued on next page**

**Continued** There will be district personnel available to students who need special attention and support. There is also help available from the community. We will try to maintain as normal a routine and structure as the situation and people allow, and we encourage you to do the same. If you feel that your child or family needs some assistance, please contact us, and we will do everything we can to help you. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the school at (give preferred phone numbers). We know you will join us in our concern and sympathy for the family.

#### SAMPLE LETTER TO PARENTS: STAFF DEATH

(Date)

Dear Parent/Caregiver,

All of us at (**School**) were saddened to receive news this morning of the death of a longtime teacher, (**Name**). (**Name**) was recently diagnosed with severe brain tumors and died this morning. In her years at (**School**), (**Name**) touched the lives of many students, parents, and staff.

Students and staff will react in different ways. We should expect, try to understand, and accept a variety of emotions and behaviors. The most important thing we should do is to be supportive and to encourage discussion about the event, the feelings it gives rise to, and what are some ways that we can respond to it. Your child's teacher notified his or her students of (**Name**)'s death at the end of the school day. We would encourage you as parents to talk further with your children this evening.

If you would like your child to visit with our school counselor, (**Name**), please call the school office at (phone number) or send a note to your child's teacher.

At this time we have not yet received information regarding funeral arrangements. We do anticipate that many of our staff members will want to attend the services. We are working to obtain substitute teachers who will help us cover student classrooms. If you may be able to come to school and help us in classrooms, please call our office (phone number) and give your name to our secretary, Mrs. (**Name**).

We know that you will join us in our concern, support, and sympathy for those involved in and affected by this incident. We also greatly appreciate your cooperation and assistance.

Sincerely,

Principal

## SAMPLE LETTER HOME FOLLOWING A MAJOR ACCIDENT, DISASTER OR DISRUPTION

Dear Parents:

Today has been a tragic day and we are all affected by the great loss. As parents you may want to talk to your children about today's tragedies and their impact. Witnessing or even hearing of a traumatic incident may affect a child or adult in a variety of ways. Therefore, it is very important that children be given ample opportunities to ask questions and to talk about their reactions to the incidents. Currently children may also have concerns about their safety and security and consequently may need reassurance.

When reacting to a traumatic incident, a child may display behaviors such as the following:

- Clings close to adults
- Displays regressive behaviors (acting like a much younger child)
- Repetitively reenacts the event in play activities
- Appears not to be affected
- Thinks about it privately
- Asks a lot of questions
- Appears frightened
- Appears agitated and angry
- Appears sad and withdrawn
- Displays difficulty sleeping
- Stomach aches and somatic complaints

It is very important that you take the time to listen to your children. If they seem to need to talk, answer their questions simply, honestly and possibly over and over again. Below are some suggestions that parents may find useful in helping your child deal with the present events:

- Assure fearful children that you will be there to take care of them.
- Reassure them many times.
- Provide physical closeness.
- Spend extra time putting your child back to bed.
- Talk and offer reassurance.
- Encourage children to ask questions and to discuss, write or draw their feelings.
- Be a good listener. Listen carefully for any misconceptions or distortions the student may have regarding what happened.
- Talk with your child and provide simple, accurate information to questions.
- Provide play and fun experiences to relieve tension.
- Help the child develop safety plans and procedures ("What should you do if....?")
- Remind them of concrete examples of where they are being protected and cared for by parents, adults, teachers, police, etc.
- Make sure the child gets rest and exercise.

Sincerely,

Principal

# APPENDIX GRIEF INFORMATION

## STAGES OF GRIEF

Following a death, those left behind grieve in a variety of ways. Although grief is usually described in a series of stages, not everyone touched by the death goes through the stages of grief in the order listed below, and not every person goes through every stage. In addition, some people may return to previous stage.

### DENIAL

“No, it can’t be! Not him/her!” This may be mixed with shock or disbelief that the event has actually occurred. Students may spend time confirming the facts with fellow students, hoping to discover that there has been some mistake in the reporting.

### ANGER

“Why him/her? Someone else is always doing bad things. Why not someone else?” As the reality of the loss sinks in, there may be blaming of other people for the event having happened. Or there may be anger at unrelated people and events, a need to rant and rave and be critical.

### DEPRESSION

“It’s so hard, everything is so hard and nothing seems important anymore.” Often depression sets in as anger begins to lessen. Depression is normal during a period of loss. The person generally lacks energy and retreats from activities and people. Although survivors have other people for support, they may still feel very much alone and sad.

### BARGAINING

“Dear God, if you bring him/her back again, I promise I’ll be good and never get mad at him/her again.” This may be associated with feelings of guilt, where a student wishes to undo earlier interactions with the one who has died, or even make promises that if this event can be undone, the survivor will be a better, different person.

### ACCEPTANCE

“Well, I don’t like what’s happened, (sigh) but I can’t change anything about it now.” This is the culmination of successful grieving when survivors come to grips with the reality of death.

### LIFE AFTER

Individual and families probably won’t end up at the same place they started before the loss or crisis began. If the loss was severe such as suicide of a close friend or family member, the person or family may function at a lower level for the rest of their lives. However, if people can accept their feelings, talk them out, and accept help from others; they may have a new sense of self-esteem, security, and empowerment, knowing they can meet challenges and problems in the future.



## Responding to Bereavement and Loss: Developmental Factors

Preschool to Early Elementary Children	Elementary School-aged Children	Adolescents
<p><b>Developmental Considerations:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Beginnings of concrete reasoning</li> <li>▪ Magical thinking</li> </ul> <p><b>In the Event of Death:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Belief that death is reversible or temporary (magical thinking: ‘If I wish hard enough I can change what happened.’)</li> <li>▪ Can come to understand the permanence of death</li> <li>▪ Worries linked primarily to concern about only those child knows</li> </ul> <p><b>Behavior Changes After Loss</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Whiny Clingy</li> <li>▪ Withdrawn &amp; subdued</li> <li>▪ Acting out the loss and surrounding activities in play</li> <li>▪ Regressive behaviors (e.g., baby talk, needing more help with daily activities, bed-wetting)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Developmental Considerations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Language matures, but children take words literally               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Misconceptions and misattributions</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Understanding of permanency, inevitability, finality, and causality (usually by five to seven years)</li> <li>▪ Further development of empathy</li> <li>▪ Worry begins to expand to those they may not know who are impacted in similar ways</li> </ul> <p><b>In the Event of Death</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Me”-oriented thinking may lead to the notion that it was the child’s words or thoughts that led to the death (e.g., “When I told my sister ‘I wish you were dead,’ did I cause it to occur?”).</li> <li>▪ Fantasy and magical perceptions may loss.</li> <li>▪ influence the interpretation of the</li> <li>▪ Clichés associated with death (e.g., having the pet “put to sleep”) may be taken literally.</li> <li>▪ Adults may observe events</li> </ul>	<p><b>Developmental Considerations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Increased abstract thinking</li> <li>▪ Thinking about the future</li> <li>▪ Continued feelings of blame and guilt</li> <li>▪ Better appreciation of personal mortality and death</li> <li>▪ Personal vulnerability, masked by acting detached from death</li> <li>▪ MS fascination with death and the body and what happened or happens with the body,</li> <li>▪ HS focus on who knew the deceased best, closest to them, most impacted by the death...</li> </ul> <p><b>In the Event of Death</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ High-risk behaviors               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Absenteeism</li> <li>▪ Substance abuse/alcohol use</li> <li>▪ Promiscuity</li> <li>▪ Reckless driving</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Increased withdrawal and indifference</li> <li>▪ Discussions and/or fascination with death and dying</li> <li>▪ Concern about the future and their place in it</li> <li>▪ Increased risk for depression and suicide</li> </ul>

U.S. Department of Education ~ Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools



# DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF UNDERSTANDING DEATH AND GRIEVING

## Preschool Age:

Preschoolers do not understand that death is permanent and view it as reversible and temporary. Death may be confused with sleeping or the person merely being absent, with the belief the person will return. Since children are egocentric, death may be perceived as punishment for wrongdoing or caused because the child has previously wished the person dead. Sometimes, death is thought of as violent. Children also sometimes think they might catch the condition which caused the death. Some children think dead people live underground.

Preschoolers may exhibit these possible behaviors upon the death of a parent, peer, or other love one:

- May show little concern at times.
- Bedwetting, thumb sucking, baby talk, fear of the dark.
- Fear of separating from significant others.
- May need to talk about death a lot. These repetitions make it real for the child and he/she may say things, such as, "Ben can't use his dump truck anymore because he's dead."

Adults can do the following to help a child cope with death:

- Tell them what to expect regarding the funeral, parents/family grieving.
- Explain to them how things might look and what might happen.
- Encourage all adults in the school to use terms "dead/death" and not phrases of "passed away," "sleeping," "resting," or "taken from us." Children think in literal terms and may fear going to sleep themselves.
- Reassure the child regarding routines, activities, and schedules.
- Keep explanations short, simple, and truthful. Explanations may need to be frequently repeated.

## School Age:

From five to nine years of age, the child begins to perceive death as possible for others but not for him/her.

Between nine and eleven years, the child will perceive death as including them. Death is becoming more real, final, universal, and inevitable. The child may show interest in biological aspects of death and want to know details of the funeral.

## **Adolescents:**

Adolescents will frequently have encountered several situations of loss in addition to death. These losses may include separation from friends, relatives, or acquaintances, and may trigger feelings of unresolved grief. Adolescents frequently respond to death very intensely. Developmentally, the adolescent is searching for explanations regarding all aspects of life, which includes death.

Adolescents may associate death with:

- peaceful sleep that will make everything better (note: ask directly about suicide and refer for help if necessary!)
- punishment
- a form of control (of self and others) if self-caused
- satisfaction/peace
- romantic ideals
- reunification with someone who has died
- escape from feelings of hopelessness/helplessness

School-age children and adolescents may show these behaviors:

- crying and/or sobbing, anxiety, guilt
- headaches
- abdominal pain
- denial of death
- hostile reaction toward deceased
- poor grades
- lack of attention
- loss of manual skills
- fear of continuing friendship bonds: What if I lose another friend?

Adults can help school-age children and adolescents by:

- Providing honest, age-appropriate information in response to questions
- Physically and verbally comforting students—acknowledgment of their pain
- Flexing the student's schedule as needed
- Referral to appropriate counseling resources
- Admitting that adults do not always know why certain events happen
- Connecting students to helpful adults they identify for ongoing check-ins

# Six Reconciliation Needs of Mourning:

## **Need 1. Acknowledge the Reality of Death.**

Children must be provided with an honest and open explanation (at their developmental level of understanding) about the nature and cause of the death. News of a death is best conveyed from someone who has a preexisting, stabilizing relationship with the child. The child needs to be provided with opportunities to talk out, play out, or even act out the circumstances of the death.

## **Need 2. Move Toward the Pain of the Loss While Being Nurtured.**

To heal, the bereaved child should be encouraged to embrace the wide range of thoughts and feelings that result from the death. Sometimes what they need from adults is an awareness that it is ok to talk about and play out their many thoughts and feelings. Children mourn intermittently; we should acknowledge this wave-like quality in their capacity to mourn.

## **Need 3. Convert the Relationship from one of Presence to One of Memory.**

This need involves allowing and encouraging children to move from the “here and now” of their relationship to the “what was”. The relationship must be altered from one of presence to one of memory. This process often begins with the funeral. One of the best ways to embrace memories is through the creation of a “Memory Book”. Remembering makes hope possible.

## **Need 4. Develop a New Self-Identity.**

The death of someone loved can, and often does, permanently change the child’s self-perception. As children work on this central need of mourning, the child often finds themselves thinking, feeling, and acting in ways that seem totally foreign. This is an inherent part of the search for a new identity in the absence of the person who died. While every- one in the family will have new roles and responsibilities when a death occurs, we should never assign inappropriate role responsibilities to children (i.e., “Now you are the man of the house.” This puts an impossible burden on a child. The identity of bereaved children is also impacted in that they become aware that they and others around them are mortal.

## **Need 5. Search for Meaning in the Loss.**

This involves allowing the child to search for and restore a sense of meaning in life after the death. “How?” and “Why?” questions. Many adults make the mistake of thinking they must always have answers to the bereaved child’s questions. Adults need to know they do not have all the answers.

## **Need 6. Experience Long-Term Support.**

Grief is a process, not an event. Children who actively participate in the work of mourning will need stabilizing adults in their lives long after the event of the death. Grief is not an enemy to overcome, but a necessary consequence of having loved. Children’s “grief bursts” – heightened periods of loss and sadness – demand understanding, not judgment. Grief bursts may occur during pivotal life moments (birthdays, holidays, vacations, graduation, getting married, having children, etc.)

# Nine Common Myths of Childhood Grief:

## **Myth 1: Grief and mourning are the same experience.**

Grief represents the thoughts and feelings that are experienced within children when someone they loved dies (internal). Mourning means taking the internal experiences of grief and expressing it outside oneself (external). Because bereaved children mourn more through their behaviors than they do with words, mourning for them is typically not expressed in the same ways it is for adults.

## **Myth 2: Children only grieve for a short time.**

Bereaved children do not heal quickly; it can often take years.

## **Myth 3: A child's grief proceeds in predictable, orderly stages.**

People use the "stages of grief" to try and make sense of an experience that is not as orderly and predictable as we would like it to be.

## **Myth 4: Caregivers do not have to mourn for their children to mourn.**

Parents and other significant adults in a child's life have the biggest influence on the child's own grief experiences. The problem comes when parents, however loving and well-intentioned, try to conceal their own grief and mourning from their children in an attempt to protect them from more pain. This is a mistake, as appropriate modeling is a primary way that children learn.

## **Myth 5: Bereaved children grow to be maladjusted adults.**

Bereaved children can heal and grow with early intervention and compassionate care.

## **Myth 6: Children are better off if they do not attend funerals.**

The funeral provides a structure that allows and encourages both adults and children to comfort each other, openly mourn, and honor the life of the person who has died. Children should be encouraged to attend, but never forced.

## **Myth 7: Children who cry too much are being weak and are harming themselves.**

When bereaved children cry, they are indicating their willingness to do the work of mourning.

## **Myth 8: Children are too young to understand death.**

Teaching abstract concepts about death and religion is no easy task, but it is one we must take seriously as we try to help bereaved children. Bereaved children need age-appropriate care.

## **Myth 9: We should help children "get over" their grief.**

Healthy mourning takes a long time. Like adults, children do not get over grief; they learn to live with it.

Notes taken from Brock, S., Lazerus, P., & Jimerson, S. 2002. Best Practices in School Crisis Prevention and Intervention. NASP Publications, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402. Bethesda, MD 20814. pp. 653-674

# NORMAL GRIEF REACTIONS

A person may experience some of the following responses when someone they love dies. They are all natural and normal reactions to the loss of a loved one.

## YOU MAY

- Find it difficult to sleep at night; frequent dreams of your loved one.
- Feel emptiness in your stomach and lose your appetite.
- Have difficulty concentrating on a task or completing an activity.
- Feel restless, wander aimlessly, or find yourself becoming forgetful.
- Sense the loved one's presence (expecting them to walk in the door at the usual time, hearing their voice, seeing their face).
- Feel as though the loss isn't real—it didn't really happen.
- Assume mannerisms or traits of your loved one.
- Experience an intense preoccupation with the life of the deceased.
- Feel guilty or angry over things that happened or didn't happen in your relationship with the deceased.
- Feel very angry at your loved one for leaving you.
- Cry at unexpected time.
- Feel your mood change abruptly.
- Feel an urge to tell and retell and remember things about your loved one and the experience of their death.
- Feel a need to take care of the people around you who appear uncomfortable by politely not talking about your feelings of loss.
- Have a "grief burst" when you hear a familiar song, drive by a place you used to go with the person who died, etc.

These grief responses are natural and normal.

National Mental Health Information Center Article location:

<http://www.mentalhealth.org/publications/allpubs/Ca-0022/default.asp>

## HOW FAMILIES CAN HELP CHILDREN COPE WITH FEAR AND ANXIETY

Whether tragic events touch your family personally or are brought into your home via newspapers and television, you can help children cope with the anxiety that violence, death, and disasters can cause.

Listening and talking to children about their concerns can reassure them that they will be safe. Start by encouraging them to discuss how they have been affected by what is happening around them. Even young children may have specific questions about tragedies. Children react to stress at their own developmental level.

The Caring for Every Child's Mental Health Campaign offers these pointers for parents and other caregivers:

- Encourage children to ask questions. Listen to what they say. Provide comfort and assurance that address their specific fears. Its okay to admit you can't answer all of their questions.
- Talk on their level. Communicate with your children in a way they can understand. Don't get too technical or complicated.
- Find out what frightens them. Encourage your children in a way they can understand. Don't get too technical or complicated.
- Focus on the positive. Reinforce the fact that most people are kind and caring. Remind your child of the heroic actions taken by ordinary people to help victims of tragedy.
- Pay attention. Your child's play and drawings may give you a glimpse into their questions or concerns. Ask them to tell you what is going on in the game or the picture. It's an opportunity to clarify any misconceptions, answer questions, and give reassurance.
- Develop a plan. Establish a family emergency plan for the future, such as a meeting place where everyone should gather if something unexpected happens in your family or neighborhood. It can help you and your children feel safer.

If you are concerned about your child's reaction to stress or trauma, call your physician or a community mental health center.

National Mental Health Information Center Article location:

<http://www.mentalhealth.org/publications/allpubs/NMH02-0138/default.asp>

# **AGE-SPECIFIC INTERVENTIONS AT HOME FOR CHILDREN IN TRAUMA: FROM PRESCHOOL TO ADOLESCENCE**

Children are just as affected as adults are by a disaster or traumatic event. Some may be affected even more, but no one realizes it. Without intending to, we, as parents, may send our children a message that it is not all right to talk about the experience. This may cause confusion, self-doubt, and feelings of helplessness for a child. Children need to hear that it is normal to feel frightened during and after a disaster or traumatic event. When you acknowledge and normalize these feelings for your children, it will help them make peace with their experience and move on.

Following exposure to a disaster or traumatic event, children are likely to show signs of stress. Signs include sadness and anxiety, outbursts and tantrums, aggressive behavior, a return to earlier behavior that was outgrown, stomachaches and headaches, and an ongoing desire to stay home from school or away from friends. These reactions are normal and usually do not last long. Whether your child is a preschooler, adolescent, or somewhere in between, you can help your child by following the suggestions below:

## **Preschooler**

- Stick to regular family routines.
- Make an extra event to provide comfort and reassurance.
- Avoid unnecessary separations.
- Permit a child to sleep in the parents' room temporarily.
- Encourage expression of feelings and emotions through play, drawing, puppet shows, and storytelling.
- Limit media exposure.
- Develop a safety plan for future incidents.

## **Elementary Age Children**

- Provide extra attention and consideration.
- Set gentle but firm limits for acting out behavior.
- Listen to a child's repeated telling of his/her trauma experience.
- Encourage expression of thoughts and feelings through conversation and play.
- Provide home chores and rehabilitation activities that are structured, but not too demanding.
- Rehearse safety measures for future incidents.
- Point out kind deeds and the ways in which people helped each other during the disaster or traumatic event.

## **Pre-adolescents and Adolescents**

- Provide extra attention and consideration.
- Be there to listen to your children, but don't force them to talk about feelings and emotions.
- Encourage discussion of trauma experiences among peers.
- Promote involvement with community recovery work.
- Urge participation in physical activities.
- Encourage resumption of regular social and recreational activities.
- Rehearse family safety measures for future incidents.

It is important to remember that you do not have to “fix” how your child feels. Instead, focus on helping your child understand and deal with his or her experiences. Healing is an evolving state for most children, but some may need professional help.

If signs of stress do not subside after a few weeks, or if they get worse, consider consulting a mental health professional who has special training in working with children. In time and with help, your children will learn that life does go on.

NMH02-0138 10/02

National Mental Health Information Center Article location:  
<http://www.mentalhealth.org/publications/allpubs/KEN-01-0104/default.asp>



# **SCHOOL DISTRICT PERSONNEL AND THE NEWS MEDIA**

As a general rule, school district personnel may not be interviewed during the school day or periods of extra-curricular activities by anyone other than school district officials, regarding school business.

Identify ONE spokesperson to remain in a specified area for easy access. Develop a written statement or news release in cooperation with the Superintendent's office.

Set limits for media time/location. Provide handouts of planned school activities to handle the loss/crisis. Emphasize positive action being taken.

Divert phone calls of concern and questions to the appropriate staff.

School district personnel, while on the school district grounds, shall refer requests they receive to be interviewed or provide information to the news media, to the administrative office in their building.

The media should not be allowed in the school and should not be allowed to interview students. However, the superintendent should designate one person to be the media liaison to keep them informed of factual information from the school.

It shall be the responsibility of the superintendent to develop administrative regulations regarding this policy.

# Memorial Services/Special Activities

Make arrangements for excused absences for students wishing to attend the funeral. Make it clear that all students wishing to attend the funeral must be checked-out and taken by a parent/guardian. School staff will not take the student to the funeral.

Arrange for a staff to remove the personal effects of the deceased from classrooms and lockers. Items are returned to the next of kin by counselor, teacher, or the principal at a time that is convenient to the survivors.

Discourage parental/familial participation in assemblies (other than as guests) until a later date.

It is not recommended to offer school buildings for memorials or funeral activities. This links these facilities to the feelings of grief and death for students and staff in the future. Recognize that it is often difficult to separate honoring the student or staff from how they died (suicide, homicide, drug overdose, drunk driving...).

Provide an area for staff and students who are uncomfortable attending special activities.

## **Ensure that the district has a policy regarding physical memorials on campus!**

### **Ideas for what students can do (ensure district policy is followed):**

Alternative ways to memorialize the person lost (donate a book to the library, set up a scholarship fund, have a blood drive, etc.)

Collect money, clothing, or food for the family if needed

Create a large card that students sign during lunch or breaks; provide to family

**It is not recommended to create fixed or permanent memorials:** e.g., planting trees, place benches, plaques...What will happen to these items or spaces in 10 years when only a few staff members knew or remembered the deceased or their families?