

DEATH, DYING AND LOSS

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CHECKLIST FOR A CRISIS INVOLVING DEATH

- Assemble the CRT and relieve members of routine responsibilities.
- Notify Central Office and, thereafter, keep it informed of steps being taken. Complete and forward Incident Report to Central Office.
- Contact appropriate family member to obtain accurate information. Determine what information can be shared.
- Notify other sites if involved student or staff has relatives at other schools. Coordinate activities with them if appropriate.
- Identify close friends/associates on site who might be most impacted.
- Make an initial determination of the capacity of site staff to respond to the crisis. Contact the District Crisis Response Team if additional resources are needed.
- Inform, in person, staff members most closely associated with the crisis and provide relief if they are unable to continue with their duties. Provide the support they need to resume responsibilities;
- Support students closest to the crisis (i.e. classmates, sports team, group or club).
- Inform the rest of the staff and students (refer to sample letters in this section).
- Provide whatever debriefing is necessary for students and staff.
- Notify attendance office to forestall intrusive calls home; arrange for removal of personal belongings from school site.
- Notify parents/caregivers in writing of the crisis so they can support their children. Telephone the parents/caregivers of any students severely impacted by the crisis, such as witnesses, close friends (refer to sample letter in this section).
- Use a system to identify and refer students and/or staff who may need additional emotional support;
- Determine what additional support is needed to bring closure to the crisis, such as attending the funeral or memorial service, writing letters, planning a site memorial activity.

SAMPLE LETTER TO STAFF FOLLOWING A DEATH

(Date)

Dear Staff,

There are times when it is necessary to communicate news that is painful for all of us. During those times we must be prepared to support each other as we deal with the many feelings that we begin to experience. It is with great sorrow that I inform you that **(NAME OF PERSON)** at **(SCHOOL NAME)** has died.

Death can be difficult for us to understand, especially when it is sudden. We will all begin to feel different emotions: shock, sadness, confusion, and even some anger. What is most important is that we care for and support each other.

Although rare, sometimes students may be so overwhelmed by the death of someone important to them, which they may need to express their feelings. Please contact appropriate support service site staff if you notice a student who appears to be having more difficulty with his/her feelings than might be expected.

In memory of **(NAME)**, *indicate here what activity or activities the school is planning.* **(SCHOOL NAME)** administration will keep you updated as more information is given us at the school.

Sincerely,

(Principal's name)

SAMPLE LETTER TO STUDENTS FOLLOWING A DEATH

(DATE)

Dear Students,

I have asked your teacher to read this letter to you because I want to make sure that all students received the same information about the recent tragedy at our school. It gives me a great sorrow to inform you that ((NAME), a (teacher student/friend) at (SCHOOL NAME), has died (DAY/DATE). *(Insert what information can be shared about the cause and circumstances of the death.)*

Death can be difficult for us to understand, especially when it is sudden, many of us may be confronted with a variety of emotions that might include shock, sadness, and confusion. I want assure you that we, the (SCHOOL NAME) staff, care about you and the feelings you may be experiencing.

Please know that we want to support you during this time. The Crisis Response Team will be available to meet with you in (PLACE) to assist you in dealing with any feeling you may be having. You might wish to share memories you have of (NAME). Crisis Response Team members will also be available at any time during the day to help you if you feel a more urgent need to talk with someone. *(Insert here specific information on how students can access support service staff and collaborating agencies for support.)* I want to encourage those students who may be particularly upset, perhaps even struggling with a death in the family or of a friend, to talk with Crisis Response Team members. They will be available all day to meet with you.

Any time death touches us, it is extremely stressful. This sudden death may be quite shocking to you and confuse you. For these reasons, we especially want you to know of our caring and support.

Sincerely,

(PRINCIPAL'S NAME)

SAMPLE LETTER TO FAMILIES FOLLOWING A DEATH

(DATE)

Dear Parent and Caregivers:

I am sorry to inform you that a staff person/student/friend, **(NAME)**, at **(SCHOOL NAME)** has died **(DAY/DATE)**. *(Insert what information can be shared about the cause and circumstances of the death.)*

Death can be difficult for us to understand, especially when it is sudden. All of us will be feeling a variety of emotions: shock, sadness, or confusion. What is most important is that we care for and support each other.

The Crisis Response Team has made plans to respond to the emotional needs of the students. *(Spell out what is being done: grief counseling, classroom debriefing, referrals to support service staff and collaborating agencies)*

If your family has experienced a death or similar loss recently, the death of **(NAME)** may bring up feelings about that death. This is a normal experience. Please let your child's *(teacher or counselor)* know if there is any additional information the school should be aware of so we can provide the support your child needs.

Any time death touches us, it is extremely stressful. This sudden death may be disturbing to you as well as to your child. It is for this reason that we especially, want you to know of our caring and support.

Sincerely,

(PRINCIPAL'S NAME)

STAGES OF GRIEF REACTION*

DENIAL:

This stage may be expressed by feeling nothing or insisting there has been no change. It is an important stage and gives people "time out" to organize their feelings and responses. Children/adolescents may make bargains to bring the person back or hold fantasy beliefs about the person's return. Children/adolescents in this stage need understanding and time.

FEAR:

A crisis that results in death or a crisis that is the result of violence can instill fear in children. A child or adolescent might fear that their own parent/caregiver might die after a classmate's parent dies. Children need reassurance that they will be taken care of during this stage.

ANGER:

The sudden shattering of the safe assumptions of young people lies at the root of the grief response of anger. It can be expressed in nightmares and fears and in disruptive behavior. Children in this stage need opportunities to express anger in a positive and healthy way.

DEPRESSION:

Children may exhibit depression either through frequent crying, lethargy and withdrawal from activities, or avoidance behavior ("running away"). This can be a healthy, self-protective response that protects children/adolescents from too much emotional impact. Children need to know that others understand and that all things change, including their sadness.

ACCEPTANCE:

Acceptance of a loss and hope as seen through renewed energy signals entrance into the final stage of grieving. Before children can return to equilibrium, they need permission to cease mourning and continue living.

*Adults experience these stages also. Depending on individual needs, an individual, whether a child or an adult, may stay in one stage for a long time, move back and forth from one stage to another, or move through each stage in the order listed.

WAYS FOR FAMILIES TO HELP CHILDREN WITH GRIEF

General Information

Your child has recently experienced a loss at school, either through the death of a classmate or staff person, or has a classmate that has lost a family member. Each child grieves differently. It is most important that they get sympathy and nonjudgmental responses from their family members. Keep communicating with your child to create a safer, more supportive environment. Talking about feelings is very important. When children see adults expressing their feelings about a loss in a healthy way, they learn how to do it too.

Possible Behavioral Changes

- Restlessness and change in activity level
- Expression of security issues: Will this happen to me or others
- Clinging to parents, fear of strangers
- Withdrawal and unwillingness to discuss the loss
- Fearfulness, especially of being left alone
- Regression to younger behaviors--bedwetting, thumb sucking
- Symptoms of illness: nausea, loss of appetite, diffuse aches and pains
- Feeling guilty that it is their fault

Response of Parents/Caregivers

Children need a sense of security when a loss occurs. It is important to keep to the family routine as much as possible. Children may need more personal attention at bedtime.

Simple answers to such questions as, "When will you die?," "Can I get sick too?," or "Does everyone die?" will provide reassurance to children. Adults can seek further information to learn what the child's concern is, "Are you concerned that I might not be here to care for you?" or "Are you worried you might die soon too?" Brief answers based on fact are best: "I don't plan to die for a long time. I hope to take care of you as long as you might need me." or "We all die. However, I don't think you need to worry that you will die yet. We are going to try and keep you well for many years."

Everyone in the family needs reassurance. Children may ask endless questions. They need information and reassurances given repeatedly. Extra play may be needed to relieve the tension related to their grief.

It is also important that children hear that whatever happened is not their fault.

HELPING A STUDENT AFTER A DEATH IN THE FAMILY

The literature indicates that during childhood, one in every twenty children in the United States will lose a parent/caregiver to death. By age 16, one in every five children will have lost at least one parent/caregiver.

The following are some suggestions for helping students face such losses:

1. **Remember that adults can make a difference** helping students when they have problems with death, because most of them have faced the death of loved ones and other significant losses.
2. **Listen and sympathize.** Make sure you hear what is said.
3. **Maintain a sympathetic never-shaming attitude** toward the student's response.
4. **Respond with authentic feelings.** It is acceptable to express grief to a child.
5. **Allow the student to cry by giving permission:** "Go ahead and cry, it's all right." Permission may be necessary, since so many strong feelings are labeled as being publicly unacceptable and some students are taught not to show emotions in public.
6. **Remember that ignoring grief will not make it to go away.** Research shows a relationship between antisocial behavior among adolescents and unresolved grief over the death of a loved one.
7. **Assure younger siblings that they are not responsible** for the person's death even though they might have had negative feelings about him or her at some time.
8. **Refer students for help when necessary.** Dealing with loss is a tricky area because sometimes normal grief looks very much like mental illness. When a teacher observes behavior, such as regressive changes in bowel and bladder control, persistent sleep problems, excessive aggression, hyperactivity, extended loss of concentration, extended withdrawal, continued regression into younger developmental behaviors, wild swings in emotions, moods or thoughts that indicate a loss of contact with reality, it is time to refer that student for support and assistance. You may refer students to on-site support services or collaborating agencies.
9. **Recognize that grief may last over an extended period of time.** When grief is openly and deeply expressed, the first six months constitute the most stressful period. Recoveries begin

during the first year and occur more conclusively by the end of the second year (refer to "Stages of Grief Reaction").