

Guidelines for Parents in Dealing with Children about Death

1. Be aware of your own needs and the impact of the death on you.
2. Provide accurate, developmentally appropriate, and understandable information to students. Restate information in several ways so your child understands.
3. Be concrete and truthful. Explain death as a literal happening. (e.g., "John was killed." "John died.") Do not use euphemisms in discussing death. This confuses children and may lead to their distorting the reality of the situation. For example, do not say, "He/she is asleep" because this may lead to children being afraid to go to sleep.
4. Answer questions without providing unnecessary details.
5. Be a good listener. Do not try to talk your child out of their feelings or deny them the opportunity to express their feelings (e.g., "Be strong" or "Don't cry; it'll be okay").
6. Listen carefully for misconceptions and distortions regarding the incident/death/crisis. Children may often feel guilty or display magical thinking (e.g. "I said I wished he would get lost and that caused him to die.")
7. Be aware that children cannot maintain intense grief and turmoil for a long time as do adults because they do not have the denial mechanisms of adults; therefore, they may come and go from grieving and emotional behaviors. They appear very upset one moment and then a few moments later appear playful and unaffected.
8. Expect and give permission for a range of emotions and reactions. All are common. Emotional reactions are not a means of avoiding school responsibility. Inappropriate responses may be an attempt to deal with the death/trauma. Some students may focus on the deceased rather than on their own feelings in discussions. Some may respond better to writing memory paragraphs or drawing memory pictures of the deceased to express their feelings and thoughts.
9. Some children may display regressive behaviors (e.g., clinging, acting, younger).
10. Activities such as artwork, music, and writing can reduce impact of loss/crisis.
11. Discuss the idea of creating memory paragraphs or pictures and giving them to the family.
12. Return to the routine as soon as possible after students have been given the opportunity to discuss the incident/death/tragedy and express feelings. Establishing/re-establishing routines helps reassure that life has returned to some kind of order.