

## **SUDDEN DEATH IN THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY: UNDERSTANDING THE SITUATION**

Everyone reacts differently when a sudden death occurs. How one responds depends on the relationship to the deceased, their personality, previous experience with death, developmental stage, concurrent stressors, and the environment they are in when coping with the loss. Feelings of shock, unreality and confusion are common. When life feels suddenly “out of control,” it is important to convey a sense of predictability and order to provide reassurance and a sense of security. There are three segments of support in the school community—administrative support of staff, staff support of students, and staff and administrative support of parents. All three are important components to consider when restoring a sense of order.

Students are impacted in many ways when a sudden death occurs -- emotionally, behaviorally, socially, and academically. Although concerned, many parents tend to discourage rather than encourage students to express their true feelings, particularly when those feelings include anger, guilt or blame. At home, children will also be aware when adults are affected by a loss. They sense their vulnerability and will intuitively hold back, often finding it difficult to express how they are feeling to the adults around them. For these reasons, school may be the most safe and secure environment for students adjusting to the impact of a loss.

If a traumatic event has occurred to students or faculty, responses of shock, numbness and unreality can follow for several days after the incident. Be prepared for unexpected or exaggerated reactions. It is common to hear countless “why” questions and the need to talk about and retell the details over and over again. Assess and separate those who are most directly affected, and prioritize how to best meet the needs of these individuals.

### **How To Help**

In times of crisis, the goal in providing support is to convey information, provide structure, and offer a safe place to articulate questions and concerns. Students, faculty, and parents need the opportunity to process, in different ways, how the death has affected them. In providing support, consider the “Three C’s”:

**Calm** presence--your ability to maintain a non-anxious presence will inspire it in others

**Concrete** information--this will dispel rumors and help others feel less anxious as they obtain factual information

**Course** of action—this provides a sense of control to offset feeling Overwhelmed

*(over)*

- **Younger children** will not be able to express how they are feeling through words; they cannot grasp the permanence of death. Painting, drawing, journals, story time, and playtime can be safe and helpful opportunities for them to convey fears, questions, and feelings. Many children will embrace an opportunity to talk, and will raise questions such as “What happens when someone dies?” or “Why is life unfair?” Worries, confusion about death, intense feelings of anger, and deep sadness readily come forth in group discussions if they are given the opportunity to talk with other children who have similar concerns.
- **Teenagers** more clearly understand the permanence of death. Despite experiencing a significant loss and the worry about losing someone else they care about, many will still believe death could never happen to them personally. Parents often make the mistake of expecting teenagers to “be strong” when they are actually feeling very vulnerable. Opportunities to write and group discussions can air feelings about loss and death, explore effective as well as ineffective ways of coping, and help adolescents sort through their confusion and pain. Teens are often more likely to share with their peers than they are with other adults.
- **School faculty and parents** who are grieving must be mindful of their own needs as they continue to support and address students’ needs. Grief is a long process, and adults will be most effective in providing support if they are also aware of how the loss is affecting them. Identifying what they need, obtaining their own support, adjusting in the work schedule--all will need attention when coping with a sudden, unexpected death.

As an adult, recognize that children and adolescents will -- and can -- only express how they are affected by a death if they are ready to do so. All too often, out of love and concern, adults tend to “push” a child or teen into individual counseling or group support, which only serves to aggravate an already emotionally stressful situation. For those who feel safe, if they are given the opportunity, significant growth and insight often occurs with minimal adult involvement or intervention, when a student is ready. PATHways Center for Grief & Loss is a resource that can help you identify what might be most helpful to you, your students, or your school.

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