

WHAT STUDENTS NEED IN TIMES OF TRAGEDY

- **Honest answers:** There is no way to begin to grieve without understanding how someone died or what the reality of the situation is...consider how differently you feel if a loved one is killed in an unavoidable accident or a reckless incident or an intentionally perpetrated act or a suicide. Our grief is dependent upon the circumstances of the loss, and the only information to ever give children is **the truth**. The only variable in that element is the amount of detail. It is not necessary to give gory or frightening details. But if there is information you are choosing to withhold, be honest about that. This is respectful of their integrity and the only way to maintain trust.
- **Reality checks:** The reality will sink in at different rates for different children. Because of denial, a common initial response to tragedy, it will be necessary for adults to repeat details of the event until the children really grasp it.
- **A variety of ways to do memory work:** Some students will want to talk about their favorite memories of the person who has died. Some will do better drawing pictures, doing collages or writing a letter to the family. One suggestion in either leading classroom discussion on this or encouraging writing/art is to suggest that they focus on their regrets and appreciations about this person. With younger children choose simpler words or define the meanings of regret and appreciation. This is an essential part of grief work.
- **A means to say good-bye:** We grieve in the environment of the loss... that means that the children may not be able to go home and process the loss with parents, who didn't know the deceased in the context of the school in the way the student did. For youth to really mend from the loss, the school needs to facilitate a means for youth to have a period of grieving as well as having a time when that formal grieving time is over. Reminisce, say good-bye, and get on with life. This may be as simple as a tree planting or as organized as a memory activity for the school. See the section on memory activities. Remember that doing this is the statement that the community of the school as a whole is done with the formal period of grieving, but that this *in no way* suggests that individuals are over their grief.
- **Reassurance:** The younger the student, the more there may be need for reassurance. When one person dies, it is not uncommon for children to generalize and fear that other special people will die in the same way. We cannot promise children that another person won't die, but it is reassuring to point out that it makes sense to us that they might have that fear, but that we don't expect this kind of death to happen again soon to anyone we know. **Of course**, if the death

is one in which you anticipate other deaths to follow, you would be honest about that. All reassurances must be honest and without promises of things over which we have no control.

- **No comparisons:** It is not helpful to idealize the person who has died. If students (or staff!) are painting the deceased as a superhuman angel of some sort, it is helpful to point out that s/he was just human like the rest of us, with strengths and weaknesses. Help them realize that making someone else sound perfect isn't what makes us miss them... it is the love and caring that was shared that brings about the pain of grief when we lose someone special.
- **To continue to be... just who they were before!** Often a family will redefine a child's role when someone dies -- if a father dies it is important not to expect the oldest son to be the man of the house. He is still just the oldest son. The child may have more work to do at home, but he is still just a child, and needs the support and room to be so. Watch that this general caution is also respected at school, and that we don't lay additional expectations of grieving students, but instead that we support them in their grief.
- **Opportunities to move in and out of the grief process:** Children move in and out of grieving, sometimes rather quickly with many transitions in a single day. When they are playing and laughing, it is not disrespectful -- it is a healthy reprieve, though temporary, from the pain of the loss. Encourage them to go outside for recess and enjoy the parts of life they can... and be there to support them when they move back into the tears and sadness.
- **To know that they don't have to protect you:** Children often choose their words carefully if they think that what they are saying might make you cry -- they think that their words are adding to your grief. They don't understand that they are just providing you an opportunity to let out a few of the tears you already had inside you. Model for them that sadness and tears are a part of grief and that there is nothing they might have to say or to ask that you want them to withhold.
- **To be included:** So any memorial activity you plan will be more effective for them if they feel some sense of ownership. Ask them for their ideas of what a most fitting tribute might be. If you are aware that a student who has experienced a family death is not being included in the planning of the family memorial service or funeral, and if you know the parents well enough to do so, consider suggesting to them that they include the children in the planning.
- **For you to do your own grief work:** If you are stuffing down your unresolved grief, it is awfully difficult not to be giving children nonverbal messages that we'd rather they didn't talk about the tough stuff. Realize that the more of your own grief work you've done, the better you'll be at supporting them in theirs.
- **For you to have faith in their ability to cope and to be patient with them!**
Remember that they may have trouble concentrating on school work for awhile.