

Helping Students Cope with A Tragic Death

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When a child's parent is murdered, it shocks an entire school community, even more so when he is a doctor and is shot inside a hospital by someone who then takes his own life. Most people feel a mix of disbelief, sorrow, and anger. How could this happen, we wonder. It's so unfair. Our hearts go out to the victim's spouse and children. We may find ourselves thinking back to losses in our own lives and families. Parents and teachers want to help all the other students cope but are not always sure how to do so. They can worry about saying too much or too little, about not having enough information, about saying the wrong thing. Though there is no perfect approach, here are four points that can help when talking about a tragedy with students.

1. Don't over-assume what the death means to them. It is common for an adult to feel, "If I'm this upset, they must be even more so." But this is by no means always true. Students react differently depending on their closeness to the situation, their own personalities, and so on. Some may be deeply moved, others less so. Some may have many questions, others fewer. Young children may have questions that seem very blunt and concrete. This does not mean they are especially upset; it just means they're young. Most children will not be intensely affected. Showing little reaction does *not* automatically mean a student is hiding or denying his or her feelings.
2. Children are remarkably resilient. Some may become quite upset, but given a chance to express what they feel, most usually resume their normal lives—and often do so more rapidly than we adults. There is reason to worry about students who show *sustained* changes in their mood and behavior. In such cases, it is good to consult a school psychologist or other professional. But students do not benefit from extensive, probing questioning about their reactions. They do profit from simple, direct information and from adults being available to respond to their questions and to listen if and when they themselves want to talk.
3. If you receive difficult questions it can be useful to understand these before answering them. Often a question is spurred by a feeling. Rather than plunging into an immediate answer, it can be helpful to learn what motivates the question by asking, "What made you think of that?" or "Can you tell me what you were thinking about?" Once you know the source of the question, it is easier to answer effectively.
4. There may be questions you cannot answer, which can make you feel inadequate. But students, like the rest of us, are typically more comforted by straight talk than by false assurances. Rather than inventing a response, it can be much more helpful to say, "I don't know," and to ask, "What have you heard?" or, "Did you have an idea about that?" And don't worry if, in responding, you become emotional. It is alright for students to know that adults are moved by tragedies and losses.

Above all, coping is not primarily a matter of technique, not something best handled by a particular set of tactics that deviate sharply from your familiar patterns of communication. The regular routines

of both school and family life, for example, are, all by themselves, a source of comforting continuity and assurance. Adults will rarely go wrong by relying on what is most basic between them and their children—caring and connection. At these times, your presence—your simply being with them, their knowing that you are available—can be just what they need.

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