

## **SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUTH DURING TRAUMATIC EVENTS**

Tragic or traumatic occurrences can alter a person's sense of security. We know that children may be upset or have questions about what has taken place. The first and most important support for children and youth are their family. Below, is a list of ways that we can work together to create a safe environment for children and youth during this difficult time.

**Be reassuring.** Children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives. Your reactions are most important. Recognize that some children may be concerned about something bad happening to themselves, family or friends. Explain to them the safety measures in place and reassure them that you and other adults will take care of them.

**Be a good listener and observer.** Let children guide you to learn how concerned they are or how much information they need. If they are not focused on the tragedy, do not dwell on it. However, be available to answer their questions to the best of your ability. Young children may not be able to express themselves verbally. Pay attention to changes in their behaviour or social interactions.

**Monitor the news.** Images of a disaster or crisis event can become overwhelming, especially if watched repetitively. Young children in particular may not be able to distinguish between images on television and their personal reality. Older children may choose to watch the news, but be available to discuss what they see and to help put it into perspective.

**Emphasize people's resiliency.** Help children understand the ability of people to come through a tragic event and go on with their lives. Focus on children's own competencies in terms of how they previously coped in their daily life during difficult times. In age-appropriate terms, identify other critical incidents from which people, communities, or countries have recovered.

**Highlight people's compassion and humanity.** Large- scale tragedies often generate a tremendous outpouring of caring and support from around the country and world. Focus on the help and hopeful thoughts being offered to those affected by other people.

**Maintain as much continuity and normalcy as possible.** Allowing children to deal with their reactions is important but so is providing a sense of normalcy. Routine family activities, classes, after- school activities, and friends can help children feel more secure and better able to function.

**Spend family time.** Being with family is always important in difficult or sad times. Even if your children are not significantly impacted by this tragedy, this may be a good opportunity to participate in and to appreciate family life. Doing things together reinforces children's sense of stability and connectedness.

**Ask for help if you or your children need it.** Any tragedy can feel overwhelming for families directly affected, particularly those who have lost loved ones. Staying connected to your community can be extremely helpful. It may also be important to seek additional support from a mental health professional to cope with overwhelming feelings.

**Communicate with your school.** Children directly impacted by the event may be under a great deal of stress that can be very disruptive to learning. Together, parents and teachers can determine what extra support or leniency students need and work with parents to develop a plan to help student.

**Be aware of your own needs.** Don't ignore your own feelings of anxiety, grief, and anger. Talking to friends, family members, religious or cultural supports and mental health counselors can help. It is important to let your children know that you are sad. You will be better able to support your children if you can express your own emotions in a productive manner. Get appropriate sleep, nutrition, and exercise.

## **HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH LOSS, DEATH, AND GRIEF TIPS FOR TEACHERS AND PARENTS**

Talking to children about death must be geared to their developmental level, respectful of their cultural norms, and sensitive to their capacity to understand the situation. Children will be aware of the reactions of significant adults as they interpret and react to information about death and tragedy. In fact, for primary grade children, adult reactions will play an especially important role in shaping their perceptions of the situation. The range of reactions that children display in response to the death of significant others may include:

- Emotional shock and at times an apparent lack of feelings, which serve to help the child detach from the pain of the moment;
- **Regressive (immature) behaviours**, such as needing to be rocked or held, difficulty separating from parents or significant others, needing to sleep in parent's bed or an apparent difficulty completing tasks well within the child's ability level;
- **Explosive emotions and acting out behaviour** that reflect the child's internal feelings of anger, terror, frustration and helplessness. Acting out may reflect insecurity and a way to seek control over a situation for which they have little or no control;
- **Asking the same questions over and over**, not because they do not understand the facts, but rather because the information is so hard to believe or accept. Repeated questions can help listeners determine if the child is responding to misinformation or the real trauma of the event.

### HELPING CHILDREN COPE

The following tips will help teachers, parents, and other caregivers support children who have experienced the loss of parents, friends, or loved ones.

- **Allow children to be the teachers about their grief experiences:** Give children the opportunity to tell their story and be a good listener.
- **Don't assume that every child in a certain age group understands death in the same way or with the same feelings:** All children are different and their view of the world is unique and shaped by different experiences. (Developmental information is provided below.)
- **Grieving is a process, not an event:** Parents and schools need to allow adequate time for each child to grieve in the manner that works for that child.
- **Share factual, developmentally appropriate information:** Children are often bright and sensitive. They will see through false information and wonder why you do not trust them with the truth. Lies do not help the child through the healing process or help develop effective coping strategies for life's future tragedies or losses.
- **Help all children, regardless of age, to understand loss and death:** Give the child information at the level that he/she can understand. Allow the child to guide adults as to the need for more information or clarification of the information presented. Loss and death are both part of the cycle of life that children need to understand.

- **Don't assume that children always grieve in an orderly or predictable way:** We all grieve in different ways and there is no one "correct" way for people to move through the grieving process.
- **Let children know that you really want to understand what they are feeling or what they need:** Sometimes children are upset but they cannot tell you what will be helpful. Giving them the time and encouragement to share their feelings with you may enable them to sort out their feelings. **Be aware of your own need to grieve:** Focusing on the children in your care is important, but not at the expense of your emotional needs. Adults who have lost a loved one will be far more able to help children work through their grief if they get help themselves. For some families, it may be important to seek family grief counseling, as well as individual sources of support.

## DEVELOPMENTAL PHASES IN UNDERSTANDING DEATH

It is important to recognize that all children are unique in their understanding of death and dying. This understanding depends on their developmental level, cognitive skills, personality characteristics, religious or spiritual beliefs, teachings by parents and significant others, input from the media, and previous experiences with death. Nonetheless, there are some general considerations that will be helpful in understanding how children and adolescents experience and deal with death.

- **Early Elementary School:** Children at this age (approximately 5-9) start to comprehend the finality of death. At this age, death is perceived as something that happens to others, not to oneself or one's family.
- **Middle School:** Children at this level have the cognitive understanding to comprehend death. They may experience a variety of feelings and emotions, and their expressions may include acting out as a means of coping with their anger, vengeance and despair.
- **High School:** Most teens will fully grasp the meaning of death. They may seek out friends and family for comfort or they may withdraw to deal with their grief.

## TIPS FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS WITH GRIEVING FRIENDS AND CLASSMATES

Seeing a friend try to cope with a loss may scare or upset children who have had little or no experience with death and grieving. Following are some suggestions teachers and parents can provide to children and youth to deal with this "secondary" loss.

- Particularly with younger children, it will be important to help clarify their understanding of death. See tips above under "helping children cope."
- Seeing their classmates' reactions to loss may bring about some fears of losing their own parents or siblings. Children need reassurance from caregivers and teachers that their own families are safe. For children who have experienced their own loss (previous death of a parent, grandparent, sibling), observing the grief of a friend can bring back painful memories. These children are at greater risk for developing more serious stress reactions and should be given extra support as needed.
- Children (and many adults) need help in communicating condolence or comfort messages. Provide children with age-appropriate guidance for supporting their peers. Help them decide what to say (e.g., "Steve, I am so sorry about your father. I know you will miss him very much. Let me know if I can help you with your paper route....") and what to expect.
- Help children anticipate some changes in friends' behaviour. It is important that children understand that their grieving friends may act differently, may withdraw from their friends for a while, might seem angry or very sad, etc., but that this does not mean a lasting change in their relationship.

- Explain to children that their “regular” friendship may be an important source of support for friends and classmates. Even normal social activities such as inviting a friend over to play, going to the park, playing sports, watching a movie, or a trip to the mall may offer a much-needed distraction and sense of connection and normalcy.
- Children need to have some options for providing support—it will help them deal with their fears and concerns if they have some concrete actions that they can take to help. Suggest making cards, drawings, helping with chores or homework, etc. Older teens might offer to help the family with some shopping, cleaning, errands, etc., or with babysitting for younger children.
- Encourage children who are worried about a friend to talk to a caring adult. This can help alleviate their own concern or potential sense of responsibility for making their friend feel better. Children may also share important information about a friend who is at risk of more serious grief reactions.
- Parents and teachers need to be alert to children in their care who may be reacting to a friend’s loss of a loved one. These children will need some extra support to help them deal with the sense of frustration and helplessness that many people are feeling at this time.

Adopted from the National Association of School Psychologists

## **RECOMMENDED BOOKS ON GRIEF AND LOSS FOR SCHOOL STAFF**

### **Fire in my heart, ice in my veins**

Enid Samual-Traisman MSW

ISBN 1561230561

### **Grief comes to class**

Majel Gliko-Braden

ISBN 1561230472

### **How can I help?**

June Cerza Kolf

ISBN 1555611873

### **Remember . . . A child remembers**

Enid Samuel-Traisman M.S.W.

ISBN 1561230693

### **Talking about death**

Earl A Grollman

ISBN 0807023639

### **Why do people die?**

Cynthia MacGregor

ISBN 0818405988

