

Greenup County Schools

Grief Counseling Plan

November 2004

Greenup County Schools

Grief Counseling Mission Statement

Our mission is to support and encourage the students who have lost a loved one. School counselors will provide services for students who have suffered a loss. Our purpose is to give our students an opportunity to acknowledge their feelings and increase awareness of the stages of grief and to teach coping techniques.

The Counselors' Cadre of the Greenup County School district put together the information contained in this plan. They have modified the work of Izetta Smith, formerly of the Dougy Center, now with Kaiser Permanente, gathered information from the Portland, Oregon Public Schools, and compiled data from the Greenup County School district.

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In a time of loss, Counselors and other staff are prepared to provide assistance in helping members of the school community with the loss. Typically, a loss would include the death of a student, family member, teacher or other staff member. This can include car accidents, homicide, and accidental deaths. Deaths from a long-term illness could include those from cancer, cystic fibrosis and other chronic illnesses. Teen suicide, the second leading cause of death among 11-19 year olds, has a profound impact on the students, staff and community. Issues surrounding national and community disaster situations may have a direct impact on the students and staff and it is important to maintain a sense of order to the highest degree possible.

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Checklist to Use During A School Crisis

Notification

- _ Principal confirms the information from law enforcement and/or family
- _ Principal contacts District Superintendent
- _ Principal contacts Public Information Director, as needed
- _ Principal contacts school crisis team liaison
- _ Principal contacts District Counseling Coordinator, if necessary
- _ Contact staff, if necessary, using phone tree – include support staff
- _ Contact other schools that may be impacted by the crisis

Initial Crisis Team Meeting

- _ Write script for teachers, see page 19
- _ Plan school day, see pages 6-14
- _ Choose family contact person

Before School Staff Meeting

- _ Give plan for the day and scripts
- _ Go over media guidelines, see page 18
- _ Set up safe room, see page 29

School Day

- _ First period sharing information – with or without district counseling support team member
- _ Staff safe room
- _ Write letter to parents with handout/give to students, see page 22
- _ Investigate time and place of community memorial service and disseminate information

Follow-Up

- _ Follow-up staff meeting, see page 14
- _ Determine plan for follow-up needs, see pages 15-17
- _ Plan school memorial, if appropriate
- _ Determine at-risk students/staff and offer resources
- _ Evaluate effectiveness of crisis response

INTERVENTION

Intervening during a current crisis includes the following elements:

- Confirmation of a crisis or death
- Crisis team meeting
- Dissemination of information
- Planning and overseeing the school day

STEPS IN CONFIRMATION OF A CRISIS OR DEATH

- The person receiving the information about a crisis contacts the school principal.
- The principal or designated Counseling Team member confirms this information with:
 - Law enforcement to confirm the information.
 - The family.
 - Superintendent

A possible script for the family contact:

“We have distressing news. We are calling to find out how we can best help you, and to decide what information we can give to the student body and faculty.”

Points to keep in mind:

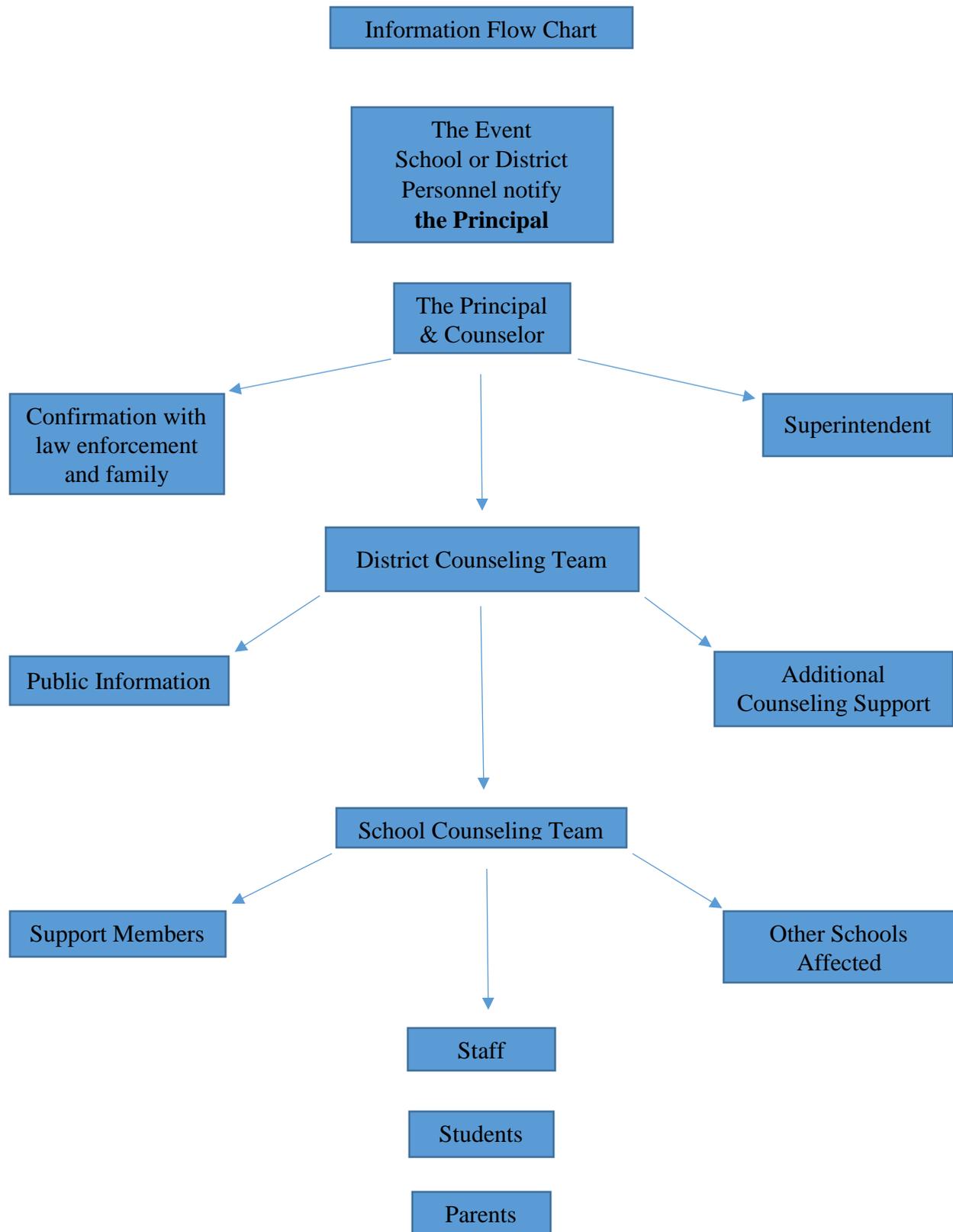
- An effort should be made to honor the family’s wishes about the information delivered to the school community while informing the family about the advantages of telling truthful and factual information.
- A family member or a family friend is identified to be the on-going family spokesperson.
- A request is made for information about the viewing, memorial, etc., if and when possible.
- Families generally appreciate concern and do not consider such a call intrusive.

The **District Counseling Team Leader** is called to consult about the crisis. The **Office of the Superintendent** is called and given the facts of the crisis.

The Counseling Team decides:

- Whether to call a Team meeting to plan for the next school day.
- Whether to call an all-staff meeting before school the next day. (A phone tree is set up to tell staff about the current situation, time and location of the all-staff meeting.)

STEPS IN CONFIRMATION OF A CRISIS OR DEATH



BEFORE SCHOOL CRISIS TEAM MEETING

WHEN DOES THE CRISIS TEAM MEET?

The school Crisis Team may meet before the start of the next day of school after an event. This is to occur early enough to allow time to plan, and to meet with the staff prior to the start of that school day, if necessary.

WHAT CONSTITUTES A CRISIS?

- AN EVENT THAT AFFECTS THE WHOLE SCHOOL like the death of a student or a staff member, or a traumatic incident in or near the school.
- AN EVENT THAT AFFECTS A STAFF MEMBER like a death in a staff member's family.
- Specific wishes of the staff member may be on file from a questionnaire such as needing childcare, food, to be left alone, help getting substitutes, etc.
- AN EVENT THAT AFFECTS A STUDENT like a death in a student's family. • A personal discussion should be arranged with the student and a teacher s/he trusts to discuss the information shared with the classroom and how it is to be shared. (—Things a Teacher Can Say or Do,|| Handout p. 20)

WHICH STAFF IS INFORMATION SHARED WITH?

- The Crisis Team decides what information is to be shared with which staff members:
- The entire staff
- The staff involved with a particular student
- The staff involved with a particular staff member
- The Crisis Team also decides how the information is to be shared:
- A handout in the staff box
- A phone tree
- At a staff meeting

WHICH STUDENTS TO SHARE INFORMATION WITH

The Crisis Team decides what information is to be shared and with which students:

- The entire student body
- A specific class
- The students involved with a particular student
- The students involved with a particular staff member

The Crisis Team also decides how the information is to be shared:

- A personal discussion with individuals
- An announcement in the first period class

ASSISTING TEACHERS WITH A SCRIPT

The Crisis Team decides whether to write a script to help teachers in giving the information to the students. (—A Script To Help Teachers Announce a Death to Their Classroom,|| Handout p. 19)

GETTING INFORMATION TO PARENTS

The Crisis Team decides if a letter should go home to the parents that day, explaining what has happened and what the school has done to process the event with the children.

A parent information night may be scheduled. (—Sample Letter to Parents,|| Handout p. 22)

USE OF THE DISTRICT EMERGENCY COUNSELING SUPPORT TEAM

The Crisis Team decides whether to call in members of the District Emergency Counseling Support Team to help support the school personnel and students during the day.

A PLAN FOR THE DAY IS DEVELOPED

The Crisis Team makes a plan for the day. They designate, if necessary, a safe room for students and faculty to go if they need emotional support. They also identify who will staff the safe room and establish a schedule for coverage.

SUPPORT FOR THE CRISIS TEAM MEMBERS

The Crisis Team members share their own reactions and feelings with each other, taking time for mutual support.

FAMILY CONTACT PERSON

A team member is designated to be the ongoing family contact person who keeps in touch with the family spokesperson.

MEDIA CONTACTS

- The Office of the Principal or Superintendent will serve as the source of official information about the death.
- The press should be courteously and firmly discouraged from coming onto school grounds.
- The Crisis Team decides whether to ask personnel from the Office of the Superintendent to be on-site during the school day to address the media.

THE SCHOOL DAY AGENDA

THREE PART STRATEGY

1. THE STAFF PRE-MEETING

- A meeting with the staff affected by the crisis

2. THE SCHOOL DAY

- The first period
- The rest of the day

3. THE DEBRIEFING MEETING

- A meeting with school personnel to debrief the day

THE STAFF PRE-MEETING

- Invite the staff that are impacted by the crisis. It can be the whole school. Part-time teachers, substitutes, bus drivers, cooks, janitors, and/or secretaries should also be considered.
- Announce the facts of the situation as known or as appropriate within the bounds of confidentiality. A handout should be prepared for the staff not in attendance and distributed by a Crisis Team Member prior to the start of school.
- Share reactions and feelings with each other, taking time for mutual support. The Crisis Team offers information on grief and answers questions and concerns from the staff.
- Give a plan for the day that is endorsed by the team.
- A safe room is designated for students and staff to go to if needed, where counselors and support people will be there to assist.
- A debriefing meeting is planned for the end of the day or within the next few days.

How to Tell The Students

- Decide which students need to be told.
- Confirm what information they will be told.
- Decide who will tell the students.
- Outline procedures for how they will be told.
- Discuss how they may react and what to do.
- Explore how to tell an —at-riskl student.

Activities to Discourage

- Delivering important information at large assemblies and/or in public address announcements. These do not provide opportunities for supporting students on a more individual basis.
- Staff and student contact with the media while at school. Media contacts can be disruptive and sometimes insensitive. Direct all media to the Superintendent.
- Removing belongings of the deceased. This is best done as a gradual process that can include family members and friends. Having concrete reminders remain in the classroom for a while can help the children and teachers remember the one who died and let go gradually.
- Staying rigid in regards to curriculum. Students may need flexibility or they may need structure. Decisions must be made on an individual basis.

THE SCHOOL DAY STUDENTS AND STAFF

FIRST PERIOD

- Information can be provided to the students according to the script written by the School Counseling Team and shared with the staff. (—A Script to Help Teachers Announce a Death to their Students,|| Handout. P. 19)
- Efforts are made to accomplish telling the designated students in classroom size groups or smaller, and in informal, comfortable settings.
- Processing time may last 10 minutes to a whole period and beyond. This depends on the comfort level of the facilitator and the needs of the students.
- Teachers should refer to Handout —Teacher’s Guidelines on How to Lead a Discussion with Grieving Students.|| p 27.

ACTIVITIES FOR THE REMAINDER OF THE SCHOOL DAY

- After processing time, the students may need a break; a recess, playground time or an unstructured art time to help with the relaxation of their bodies and the expression of their feelings.
- Or the students may welcome structured curriculum. Structure is comforting, but be flexible if students are unable to concentrate.
- Students may want to make something as a gift to the people most affected by the death. Letters, pictures and/or writings can be collected and developed into such a gift. A Memory Book or a Memory Box can be created.
- Make the students aware that there is a safe room with support people where they can go if they need to talk about the death at any point during the school day. Develop a system to keep track of their whereabouts.
- If planned, letters will be sent home with students describing the crisis and the way the school has responded.

THE SCHOOL DAY COUNSELING TEAM

- Assist teachers who have asked for help in processing the information about the counseling with the students.
- District Counseling Support Team members may be called on.
- Staff a safe room for students to go to if needed. (See —Safe Room Checklist, page 29.)
- District Counseling Support Team members may staff the room.
- Roam the halls, playground, lunchroom, and lockers – be visible and ready to assist where needed.
- Discuss at-risk students/faculty and possible interventions.
- Write the message to the parents if needed. (See —Handout Sample Letter to Parents, page 22.)
- Decide if any athletic or other events should be canceled.
- The family contact person provides the school with the information about the viewing/funeral/memorial service if available.
- Mobilize peer help programs and other school support systems.
- Plan support groups for at-risk students if necessary.
- Plan for the debriefing meeting for the staff.
- Check in with each other for support.

THE STAFF DEBRIEFING MEETING

It is suggested that staff be required to attend a debriefing meeting, either at the end of the first day after the crisis or within a few days. The staff members affected may include more than the obvious ones.

THE IMPORTANCE OF STAFF DEBRIEFING

• Support

The most critical element in a successful crisis intervention is the flexibility of the school community. The staff must have an ability to turn to each other for support so they do not isolate and carry their burdens alone. A staff that is interdependent does not become rigid in the face of a crisis.

• Education

A debriefing of the critical day by all those affected by the crisis is an excellent opportunity to share resources and ideas about how to proceed in the crisis.

- Remember, some staff may be in shock and may not be aware of their reactions.

WHAT TO INCLUDE IN THE STAFF DEBRIEFING MEETING

- Staff may need to go over what happened with their students during the day in order to:
 1. Find out if they did a good job and get reassurance.
 2. Find out what other teachers have done to get new ideas for their classrooms.
 3. Express feelings of their own that have been touched by the students or the crisis.
 4. Discuss at-risk students.

THE STAFF DEBRIEFING: PLANS FOR THE FOLLOWING DAYS

• Family Memorial

Ceremonies can aid in the healthy reconciliation of grief. Information regarding the viewing/funeral/memorial service is shared with the staff. Decisions regarding school closure and/or substitute coverage for attendance to the memorial is discussed. Staff is encouraged to educate and support students who want to attend ceremonies. Staff can play a role in the ceremonies either by memorializing the deceased or by working with students who want to participate. A designated counseling team member can attend to provide support and identify at-risk students.

• Support Groups

The Counseling Team can organize support groups for at-risk students. Teachers are alerted as to how to refer students to the groups.

PROVIDING SUPPORT AND INTERVENTION IN THE AFTERMATH OF A CRISIS

THE AFTERMATH

THE AFTERMATH OF A CRISIS IS AN ILLUSIVE THING. IT MAY LAST FOR MONTHS YET APPEAR OVER AND DONE.

It is useful to assume that grieving is being felt by those affected by the crisis whether they behave as we would expect them to or not.

Certain days may be more difficult than others:

- Birthdays of the deceased and of the grievors
- Holidays
- The anniversary of the death day, day of the week, day of the month, day of the year
- Dates that mark events significant to the deceased or family of deceased such as graduation

ACTIVITIES OF THE SCHOOL COUNSELING TEAM FOR THREE WEEKS FOLLOWING THE INCIDENT

ESTABLISH REGULAR MEETING TIMES.

KEEP ONGOING COMMUNICATION WITH THE FAMILY.

- The family contact person calls the family spokesperson. Families can be informed about the counseling plan response in the school and be invited to be involved.
- Information is gathered about the services for the deceased and staff assistance can be offered.
- Information about community resources is offered the family (support groups, professional counselors, etc.).
- Ongoing support for surviving student family members can be discussed.

BE AVAILABLE TO PARENTS.

- For phone consultation.
- To provide information about community resources and professional services.

WATCH FOR AND DISCUSS AT-RISK STUDENTS AND STAFF.

Counselors or designated Counseling Team members can:

- Create ongoing support groups for students who come on a volunteer basis or are referred by staff or other students.
- Follow up with individuals after group sessions.
- Conduct assessment interviews of referred at-risk students, staff or parents.
- Consult with specialists in the community.
- Contact parent(s)/guardian(s) of at-risk students and refer to professional counselors and community resources.

PLANNING A SCHOOL MEMORIAL

- A school memorial can be planned. A tree planting ceremony, an assembly, a memorial award, yearbook dedication, a book of memories, etc. (No helium balloon-releasing, as it is not environmentally safe.)
- Working with students/staff in a creative process for a ceremony often strengthens the student's/teacher's ability to adjust to the loss.

ISSUES IN THE CLASSROOM

- Encourage classroom flexibility. Help teachers find a balance between curriculum goals and time out to express feelings.

SUPPORT FOR THE STAFF

- The Crisis Team should be available to the staff. Encourage your members and staff to:
 1. Eat regularly.
 2. Take breaks during the day.
 3. Make plans that allow for some fun or some ease.
 4. Come to organized debriefing sessions.
 5. Acknowledge each other frequently for the hard work done.
 6. Trust yourselves and your intuitions.

THE COUNSELING TEAM AND THE FOLLOWING 3-6 MONTHS

- Counseling team meetings may continue on an occasional basis.
 - Continue to be watchful of at-risk students/staff. The grief response can be delayed. Offer necessary services or referrals.
- The counseling team should make a review of the effectiveness of the process used during the crisis with input from the staff.

WHAT TO DO WHEN THE MEDIA CALLS

In a crisis:

Follow official emergency procedures:

- Call Superintendent's Office

The most important action is to do your job and handle the crisis. If there are students involved, they are your first priority. Handling the media is not your primary responsibility, but you should make an effort to be cooperative — and not antagonistic - to media inquiries.

If a reporter tries to interview you while you are dealing with students in a crisis situation, suggest politely that you can't talk with them at that time because you need to help the students.

"I can't talk to you at this time because I need to help the students. I have a limited view of the incident and I need to talk to others about the situation. Someone will get back to you as soon as possible. May I get your name and telephone number."

Then talk to your principal, supervisor or your Superintendent about the incident before making any public comments. We will get there as soon as possible. (That is how the police and fire departments deal with issues.)

You are not obligated to speak to any reporter, even though they may pressure you to comment. Getting defensive or abusive, however, will reflect negatively on the issue.

Don't reinforce the image of the —defensive public employee denying the public's —right to know. Also, don't say —No comment. That remark sends up a red flag to any good reporter.

"I can't talk with you right now, but someone will get back to you as soon as possible."

That, in fact, is what you need to do. Remember, reporters are only trying to do their job. Treat them with respect, help them do their job, but let them know that your job has top priority for you, especially when a crisis involves students.

In a non-crisis situation:

When you receive calls from the media requesting background information, remember that your response is an opportunity to —get the word out about our excellent schools and programs.

These inquiries are not —crisis calls and you shouldn't view them with suspicion. Media requests for information are the perfect opportunity for us to provide the best information possible, from the broadest perspective. Try responding in this way:

"Thanks for calling. Could I please get back to you as soon as I can gather all the information you might need about the issue/situation/program/etc. What is your deadline? Would you mind if I have someone else also call you about this?"

You may not be the expert on the situation, but there is always someone you can call for more background information. Use the time you have available to get as much information as possible.

A SCRIPT TO HELP TEACHERS ANNOUNCE A DEATH TO THEIR STUDENTS

Dear Staff:

This is a hard task - to tell your students about the death that has occurred. **FIRST AND FOREMOST:** If you do not feel that you want to be the one to tell your students, then don't. The crisis team will make available to you someone who can lead the discussion for you, or take over your class while you seek the support you need.

Please take advantage of this resource!

We care about your needs in this sad time and want you to feel our support.

If you do want to lead the discussion, then here are the facts and some suggestions for procedures:

"I have something very sad I need to share with you." Write here the factual information (agreed upon by the crisis team) e.g.: "Joe Smith, a student who attends our school, who was missing, is dead. Yesterday, the police found the little boy's body and he had been murdered. The police are investigating the crime and will give us the information they can as they make progress in finding the killer."

Then offer some information about feelings:

"When things like this happen, people have all kinds of reactions: shock, sadness, fear, anger, no feeling at all. These reactions can come and go in an hour, a day, or for days to come. Some of us will want to be private about our feelings; some of us will want to talk to people."

Say a little about your feelings, for example:

"I am feeling very sad about what's happened and a little scared, too. I would like to spend some time together now to share with each other. Maybe we could help each other in expressing how we feel about (name of the one who died) and how s/he died."

- Take some time for discussion.
- Attached are handouts: (Handouts could include —Teacher's Guidelines on How to Lead a Discussion with Grieving Students, page 27).
- After your discussion, tell the children that there are counselors in the building if they need to talk further and arrange with them a procedure for going to see the counselor or to the safe room.
- After your discussion you may want to:
 1. Take time for recess or playground play or standing and stretching in the classroom.
 2. Do some drawing, art project or other projects – leave the subject matter up to the student.
 3. Do some Journal Writing – write down thoughts about whatever is on the child's mind.
 4. Go back to curriculum.
- These activities may be useful to continue to do at intervals during the day and to intersperse throughout your curriculum in the coming days.

If you need some support, please call the office. Do not hesitate to ask.

THINGS A TEACHER CAN SAY OR DO TO HELP A GRIEVING STUDENT RETURNING TO SCHOOL

1. Visit with the student and family if possible before the student returns to class. Talk to the student about what s/he may want the class to know about the death, who should tell them, and whether the student wants to be present. Offer, if the student chooses, to lead a sharing time when the student returns.
2. Make a plan with the student so s/he may leave the room if s/he is feeling vulnerable. Find a safe place that the student can go during the school day, at recess, at lunch or during class if he/she wants some time alone.
3. Find a safe person that the student can go to during the day if he/she is feeling vulnerable; i.e., counselor, principal, teacher.
4. Encourage the student to answer friends' questions only when s/he feels like it. If the student does not want to answer, suggest that the student say, —I'd rather not talk about that right now.!
5. Offer to support the student in telling the class during a sharing time. Whether s/he wants people to bring up talking about the death or whether s/he would like to make school a time out from grief. Remember, there are nonverbal ways you can show you care.
6. Offer the student a journal as a gift. Encourage the student to write about feelings, thoughts and/or memories in the journal during the school day when needed, especially during times the student is not able to concentrate on schoolwork. Offer crayons and a blank drawing book to a younger child.
7. Negotiate, on an ongoing basis, homework and classroom assignment expectations. Grief takes tremendous physical and emotional energy. The student may experience temporary cognitive changes, including short-term memory loss, reduced concentration and impaired sequential thinking.
8. Offer yourself as a listener or friend to the student if you want to do so. Designate times when you are available, i.e.; lunch, recess, after school.
9. Encourage a mini support group of the student's friends and allow for special arrangements so that the group can spend time together during the school day.

WHAT TO SAY TO GRIEVING STUDENTS

Both students and teachers can send a note before the student returns to school. —I'm sorry to hear that your mom died. I'm thinking about you and wanting to make your time at school the best it can be . . .

Being a good listener is the best you can offer. Allow what you say to be an opener for the student to talk if s/he wants to. If s/he doesn't want to talk, then remain available.

1. —I'm sorry that your mom died. I'm thinking about you.
2. —I'm available at lunch time (be specific) if you want to talk or shoot some baskets.
3. —When is your basketball game? Maybe I can stop by and watch you play.
4. —I'd like to do something with you on Saturday. We can either talk about your mom if you'd like, or we can go roller-skating at the mall – both are ok with me.
5. —I care about you.
6. —I want to help in any way I can. (Offer specific ideas: help with homework . . .)
7. —I am aware that today is your birthday/your mother's birthday/Mothers' Day/ the anniversary of the day your mother died. I'm thinking about you.
8. —I can't know how you feel, but I want to.
9. Share your own losses briefly, then listen: —I can't know how you feel, but I did have my grandfather die . . . (share). What was it like for you?
10. —If you want to talk, I want to listen. If you don't want to talk, I'll hang out with you.
11. —If you don't want to talk to other students, I'll tell them about what happened to your mother.
12. —Do you want a hug?
13. —Do you have any pictures of your mom?
14. —Don't forget to continue to joke and crack-up. Laughter is food to help us endure.
Teachers: Let's talk about things we can do to make you feel more comfortable in class/school. Some ideas are included on the handout —Things A Teacher Can Say or Do to Help a Grieving Student Returning to School. (p. 20)
For the most part, it is important to say something to a grieving friend. Even if it feels awkward. The reaching out is what is important.

SAMPLE LETTER TO PARENTS

Dear Parents:

A very sad thing happened today that I want to share with you.

(Share the information honestly.)

(i.e., This morning one of our kindergarten students, (Name), was hit by a car outside of his home. According to his family, he ran out into the street and was seriously injured. He died at the hospital. We are all profoundly saddened by his death.)

We have shared this information and had discussions with all of our students (in the classroom/school) so that they know what has happened. Counselors, teachers and other support personnel have been, and will continue to be, available to students, teachers and parents on an ongoing basis. Please call the school, if you want assistance.

It is helpful for your children if you continue a dialogue with them about this important event in their lives. The death of a (student/teacher) may affect a child in a variety of ways depending on the age of the child, how well the child knew (the one who died) and the child's prior experience with grief.

When reacting to a death, a child may:

- Appear not to be affected.
- Ask a lot of questions.
- Be agitated and angry.
- Try extra hard to be good.
- Be thinking about it privately.
- Be frightened.
- Be sad and withdrawn.

We suggest that you encourage your children to talk about the events of the day. If they seem to need information, answer their questions simply, honestly, and possibly over and over again. Accept their feelings as stated. Help them explore their feelings with open statements like —Tell me more about that.¶

Our thoughts are with (family name).

Sincerely,

THE *THREE TASKS* FACING CHILDREN IN GRIEF

When someone in a child's life dies, a child grieves, a child's grieving is, in actuality, a child's tackling and mastering three significant tasks. Each child has an inner drive to master these tasks in order to regain a sense of well-being after a death has occurred.

The 1st task

A child wants *to understand* what has happened when a death has occurred.

This is a thinking task.

How to help:

Tell the truth.

Use the words 'death' and 'dead'.

Answer a child's questions, maybe over and over again.

Admit when you don't know the answer by saying so.

Allow a child to make speculations about information that is not known, and label them as so.

Give a child choices about his/her involvement in the dying process, the viewing, the service and in other events during which they can learn about what has happened.

Know that children may grieve over and over again as they grow older developmentally, and are able to understand more.

The 2nd task

A child wants *to express feelings* about the death. This is a feeling task.

When 1) the 'goneness' of someone who has died is felt, and 2) the children experience the grief of the adults in their lives—then children have an emotional and physical response.

How to help:

Listen, accept and care.

Keep a child safe. Maintain standards of discipline.

Do not let children hurt themselves or others. If they do so continually, seek professional help.

Make available outlets for the big energy of feelings: sports, active play, loud voices, hitting pillows.

Lower expectations of children at school and at home, because grief takes tremendous physical and emotional energy.

Understand that children may feel and act younger when they are grieving. Understand that children may be physically vulnerable—i.e. illness-and accident-prone—while they are grieving.

The 3rd task

A child wants *to continue to live fully in the present and open up to the future*.

This is a practical task.

How to help:

Allow children to play hard, laugh hard, and have fun even as they mourn, for this is not disloyal. In fact, it is through this play that children can be restored.

Hold the vision of a child's healing. Have faith, even when they do not, that they will regain a sense of well-being.

COPING STRATEGIES FOR CHILDREN FOLLOWING TRAUMA

(This handout is appropriate for families in the aftermath of trauma)

Rebuild and reaffirm attachments and relationships. Love and care in the family is a primary need. Extra time should be spent with children to let them know that someone will take care of them and, if parents are survivors, that their parents have reassumed their former role as protector and nurturer is important. Physical closeness is needed.

It is important to talk to children about the tragedy — to address the irrationality and suddenness of disaster. Children need to be allowed to ventilate their feelings, as do adults, and they have a similar need to have those feelings validated. Reenactments and play about the catastrophe should be encouraged. It may be useful to provide them with special time to paint, draw, or write about the event. Adults or older children may help pre-school children reenact the event since pre-school children may not be able to imagine alternative —endings to the disaster and hence may feel particularly helpless.

Parents should be prepared to tolerate regressive behaviors and accept the manifestation of aggression and anger especially in the early phases after the tragedy.

Parents should be prepared for children to talk sporadically about the event – spending small segments of time concentrating on particular aspects of the tragedy.

Children want as much factual information as possible and should be allowed to discuss their own theories about what happened in order for them to begin to master the trauma or to reassert control over their environment.

Since children are often reluctant to initiate conversations about trauma, it may be helpful to ask them what they think other children felt or thought about the event.

Reaffirming the future and talking in —hopeful terms about future events can help a child rebuild trust and faith in her own future and the world. Often parental despair interferes with a child's ability to recover.

Issues of death should be addressed concretely. The child is not to blame for others' deaths. The death is not a rejection of the child. Death is permanent and sad. The grieving process should be acknowledged and shared.

This information is from the National Organization for Victim Assistance Washington, D. C., October 1987.

WAYS TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF AT TIMES OF LOSS

Talk to family or friends about how you are feeling/doing.

Write your thoughts and feelings in a journal.

Write poetry.

Write letters of regrets and appreciations about anything in life.

Draw pictures. Get into art.

Play a game or sport. Get lots of exercise.

Listen to soothing music.

Listen to raucous music and dance!

Snack on healthy foods. Take vitamins.

Enjoy a bubble bath.

Care for your pets and houseplants.

Take a favorite stuffed animal to bed with you.

Read a favorite story.

Ask someone who loves you to read you a story.

Let yourself cry.

Ask for a hug. Ask for another hug.

Get lots of sleep.

Spend time in prayer or meditation.

Collect a favor from someone who owes you one!

Treat yourself to a massage.

Light a candle.

Sing loud.

Laugh. Rent a great, hilarious video. See a fun flick.

Ask for a hug. Ask for another hug !

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YOUTH

(Use this as a guideline – amend and add to it as needed.)

We thought this might be a good time for all of us to think about how to get through the next day or two. Here are a few suggestions on how we can support each other.

Put a little extra energy into friendships. Call each other more often for the next few days. If you had a good talk with someone today and don't know his or her phone number, get it before you leave school.

Eat nutritious food and try to get plenty of sleep.

Let your parents know what today has been like. Tell them what you'd like from them. Let them know how they can support you.

Look for ways to support each other:

- Check in with each other.
- Spend more time together.
- Do some fun things, too. Take breaks from the grief. • Let the school counselor know if there is someone you're concerned about.
- Go see her/him if you're having a tough time – especially if you're having nightmares, fears or thoughts that you just can't get to go away.

For those of you who go to the funeral . . .

It will be a (*church / graveside/ whatever*) service. Dress for the weather. (*Where will it be held? Will there be a viewing? Other information regarding this.*)

If you want to take flowers or cards, it is fine to do so. Even though it may feel awkward, when you are there it is helpful to go ahead to talk to the family. Saying that you feel bad about this, that you are sad, that you wish there were something you could do to make it better, any honest expression of how you are feeling is a fine thing to say. It is also fine to tell the family what one thing you admired or liked most about (*the deceased child*). Share your favorite memory with them.

If you know other family members, it is better to talk to them than avoid them. We don't want them to feel further isolated. It is OK that you may feel awkward.

If you are going to attend the service tomorrow, remember your permission slip. Remember that you are to check in to your first period class/attendance office and be excused from there. All students are expected to return to school after the service. If students feel the need to talk to someone tomorrow, supportive adults will be available.

TEACHER GUIDELINES ON HOW TO LEAD A DISCUSSION WITH GRIEVING STUDENTS

1. AS SOON AS POSSIBLE

Hold the discussion (talking circle) as soon as possible after a crisis to avoid confusion and misinformation.

2. A TEACHER CAN HAVE HELP

You must be comfortable enough with the issues being discussed in order to lead the discussion. If you are not comfortable, ask for help from a counselor/crisis team member.

3. A CIRCLE

A circle is the best shape to include all members in a discussion. Move the desks, sit on a rug, etc.

4. STRUCTURED OR UNSTRUCTURED

A talking circle can be structured so that each student has an opportunity to speak in turn around the circle or the leader can facilitate an open, unstructured discussion. Younger students and students facing greater trauma are relieved by the more structured format.

5. “I PASS” RULE

In a structured talking circle, a child can choose not to share by saying —I pass. This rule keeps the discussion safe for a student by honoring his/her own pace.

6. “TALKING STICK”

In a structured talking circle, use a special object as your —talking stick (a stuffed animal, a special rock, a wand). The one holding the object is the only one to speak.

7. TELL THE TRUTH

Use accurate information and appropriate words (i.e., died, murder, suicide). If you don't know the answers to the student's questions, say so. Offer to find out answers and report back, if possible.

8. SHARE YOUR OWN FEELINGS

It is good modeling and greatly cherished by students if their teachers share honestly about their own feelings, (tears are OK). Do not look to your students as your source of support, however. Show your students that you rely appropriately on your adult peers for emotional support.

9. SHARE FEELINGS AND MEMORIES IN THE GROUP 10. REFLECTION

Listen carefully when a student shares an experience and be willing to simply reflect their statements. This often gives the students a sense of what they are feeling and inspires them to proceed along their own direction at their own pace.

11. AVOID ASKING TOO MANY QUESTIONS

Questions can often generate a conversation in a more unstructured discussion but too many questions can lead the conversation in the direction of the facilitator's wants and needs.

12. AVOID INTERPRETATIONS

If a student is indirect or is using symbols in order to express him/herself, it is because direct communication is too painful. Communicate with a student through the information and the symbols that are offered.

13. AVOID JUDGMENT

Referring to a student's sharing as either —good|| or —bad|| can encourage a student to seek adult approval while discouraging the student to trust his/her own way of expressing grief. You can say —thank you|| for their sharing.

14. META-COMMUNICATE WITH OTHER STAFF IN THE CIRCLE

Meta-communication is communication that takes place between the facilitators in a talking circle. This meta-level conversation is one that is meant to be —overheard|| by the students and allows the facilitators a time of reflection with each other. Possible uses: high-lighting important information shared, slowing down and processing a difficult interaction, giving emotional support to the process as a whole, acknowledging our own feelings.

15. ALLOW FOR SILENCE 16. ALLOW FOR TEARS

Often a little silence expresses the care that is needed and allows the one who is crying time to understand the meaning of the tears.

17. ALLOW FOR SPECULATION

When students do not have the information they need to make the explicit pictures of what has happened, they will make up the missing pieces in their minds. Accept their speculations as their attempts to understand.

18. ALLOW FOR JOKING AND LAUGHTER

Sometimes students laugh when they are nervous and uncomfortable. We all do.

Normalize this process to the students and find ways for the healthy release of laughter.

19. ENCOURAGE OTHER SUPPORT

As the group sharing is coming to a close, discuss with the students other ways they may get the support they need as they continue to grieve, i.e., a safe room or other specific adults in the school building, adults at home, friends, resources in the community.

20. FEELINGS MAY CONTINUE

As the group sharing is coming to a close, inform students that they may continue to experience a wide range of feelings in the coming days/weeks/months. Feelings (anger, fear, numbness, happiness, guilt, regret, relief, etc.) are normal.

21. CLOSURE

Express your appreciation for what has been shared and have a moment of acknowledgement for what the group may be going through. (Young students can hold hands and send a —love squeezel|| around the circle.)

SAFE ROOM CHECKLIST

These items are helpful to have on hand. Please coordinate with incoming District Emergency Counseling Support Team in setting up the Safe Room.

- ✓ Name tags for staff
- ✓ Chairs, tables, big pillows,
- ✓ Food, drink (avoid cookies, high sugar content – try fruit, cheese) A great idea is to have toasters and let students make cinnamon toast.
- ✓ Sign-in and sign-out sheet
- ✓ Fact sheet with information about the tragedy
- ✓ Kleenex
- ✓ Materials for writing, drawing; paper, pens, crayons, etc.
- ✓ Stuffed animals, big pillows, blankets, —comfyll things, cots
- ✓ Age-appropriate books – see suggested book list
- ✓ Tape player and tapes of relaxing music
- ✓ List of community resources to hand out to selected students
- ✓ List of students who might need follow-up
- ✓ Handouts on self-care for students, staff and Safe Room staff

Activities: Talking, sitting, writing, coloring, walking, listening to music, quiet time, working on assignments, drinking hot chocolate . . . just a time to feel —safe enough to feel.

Highly emotional students will be referred to the counselor for one-to-one time.

Four Principles of Support for Children in Grief

ONE - Grieving is a child's normal and healthy response when someone in his/her life has died.

TWO - Every child has an innate ability to heal and is inspired with an inner drive to do so.

THREE - Each child's process of grieving is his/her own and is unlike any other child's process.

FOUR - The way to assist a child's grieving process is to give truthful information, acceptance and caring.

Developmental Stages for Children in Grief

The Adolescent (13 to 19 years)

The peer group is becoming the primary support for a teenager in grief. The family remains a significant resource, but the teen is ambivalent about dependency on the family as he/she is asserting his/her independence.

Teens are fast developing their reasoning powers and use discussion as a primary form of learning and processing the significant events of their lives. They are beginning to consider concepts such as death in a more philosophical way rather than as a personal assault.

How to Help

- 1. Be honest with the information and your feelings about the death.**
- 2. Be available to the teen for discussion and expression of feelings, even if you are not taken up on it. Remind the teen of your availability at regular intervals.**
- 3. Expect to hear a teen discuss the death amidst larger issues such as the meaning of living, the unfairness in the world, etc.**
- 4. Encourage peer support for the teen, and relationships with other adults.**
- 5. Expect that you may not know parts of what the teen is processing about the death.**
- 6. Allow a teen his/her defensive behavior in hiding grief, as long as it doesn't hurt him/her or others.**
- 7. Expect that a teen may exaggerate the importance of a person who has died. Strong feelings may seem out of proportion. Allow for and accept these emotions.**
- 8. Expect periods of prolonged sleeping and inactivity, as well as periods of highly charged and frenetic behavior.**
- 9. Expect eating habits to fluctuate. Provide a structure for eating appetizing foods.**
- 10. A teen's grief may manifest in physical vulnerability, illness, recklessness and accidents. Provide structure in an attempt to avoid these.**
- 11. Provide assistance in getting a teen involved in physical outlets for his/her grief, i.e. sports, dancing, working out, etc.**
- 12. Provide assistance in getting a teen involved in expressive outlets for his/her grief, i.e. choir, drama, crafts, etc.**
- 13. Watch for drug and alcohol use and get professional help immediately if you suspect it.**

Developmental Stages for Children in Grief

The Pre-Adolescent (10 to 13 years)

Language plays more a part in the pre-adolescent's grief, although the noncognitive processes are still an important source of integration. The preadolescent is beginning to understand the inevitability, irreversibility and universality of death.

The pre-adolescent swings back and forth between the family and peer relationships for his/her primary source of support.

Emotions are heightened in the pre-adolescent's life by the onset of puberty. Yet emotions are often perceived as a threat to this child because they represent being younger, a state the pre-adolescent is struggling to overcome.

How to Help

- 1. Expect a child of this age to be in battle with his/her emotions. Respect this child's efforts to control or conceal his/her vulnerability. Be available, but don't push.**
- 2. Expect that the pre-adolescent may feel physically ill, i.e. headaches, stomachaches, cold.**
- 3. Encourage peer relationships and involvement. Look for peer support groups.**
- 4. Lower your expectations of children at school, if need be. Grief takes tremendous physical and emotional energy, which can affect the cognitive functioning of the brain. This can result in the loss of short-term memory and concentration. Work with teachers to tailor a child's workload.**
- 5. Answer questions honestly and thoroughly. If the child asks for information, answer with whatever detail and technical information seems warranted.**
- 6. Encourage physical outlets for the child.**
- 7. Let the child dissolve in your lap like a baby if she/he wants.**

Developmental stages for Children in Grief

The School-Aged Child (6 years to 10 years)

A school-aged child is still a very physical creature, processing the important events of his/her life through the body and in his/her play. Yet language is growing as a tool for the expression of feelings and the gaining of understanding. A school-aged child often thinks about death as a scary being that attacks people, similar to the villain of video games or ghost stories. This concept enables these children to believe that death can still be avoided by successful battle or escape.

A school-aged child has become more familiar with the permanence of death. This child may be fascinated with the exploration of dead insects and animals.

The family is the basis of security for a school-aged child and the major environment within which the child learns how to grieve and express his/her grief. However, peer relationships and the school environment are becoming important influences in a child's discovery of his/herself.

How to Help

- 1. Continue to answer children's questions honestly and repetitively.**
- 2. Offer to include the child in the significant processes surrounding a death in the family. Always ask a child whether he/she wants to be involved in these processes and how.**
- 3. Clarify when a child's confused thinking inhibits a child's understanding of death, e.g.**
 - death is not a punishment for a child's bad behavior.**
 - death is not something that usually happens again and again if it has happened once in a family.**
- 4. Lower your expectations of children at school, if need be. Grief takes tremendous physical and emotional energy, which can affect the cognitive functioning of the brain. This can result in the loss of short-term memory and concentration. Work with teachers to tailor a child's workload.**
- 5. Read books out loud with a child that have stories about grief.**
- 6. Encourage sports and active play in order to lessen a child's anxiety and physical tension as a result of grieving.**
- 7. Create a big energy corner of your house for the expression of the big energy of grief, i.e., pillows to throw.**
- 8. Encourage art, music, dance, singing, crafts and other expressive processes.**
- 9. Share your grief with a child. This helps model for a child how to grieve. Do not share your grief with a child if you need the child for your support. Seek your support from other adults.**
- 10. Lots of hugs and holding help.**
- 11. Find peer support groups for your child and for you.**

Developmental Stages for Children in Grief

The Young Child (2 to 5 years)

A young child understands the profundity of the event when someone close has died, even though this child may not understand what death means. A young child may think the death can be reversed, or that it happened by magic or that it was the result of his/her own actions. A young child may generalize about a death—if grandma died in a hospital, all people in hospitals die; if one person in the family dies, then more people in the family will die now too.

How to Help

- 1. Use the simple, truthful words about the death with the young child.**
- 2. Allow the child to ask questions over and over. When you do not know the answer, say so.**
- 3. Allow the child to make choices to be involved in the dying process, the viewing, the service and any other opportunity to learn about what has happened in a concrete way.**
- 4. Maintain structure and routine.**
- 5. A Child may have night sweats and scary dreams, from which they may wake up crying. Hold a child and let the child come to his/her own conclusion of the tears.**
- 6. A child may reenact aspects of the death in his/her play. Allow for this and perhaps encourage the play by joining. A child's play is a child's way to communicate thoughts and feelings.**
- 7. Tolerate a child's temporary need to become "younger." A child may lose ground with potty training. A child may return to sucking fingers/ pacifiers. A child may become clingy or want to sleep with others. Allow for this process and, when it is time, gently challenge the child to regain lost ground.**
- 8. Recognize that children's anger and sadness over their daily frustrations may be more intense because it includes the feelings of their grief. Hold and love a child as best you can in order to allow him/her to cry their way through it.**
- 9. Give a young child outlets for the big energy of their grief, i.e. active play, yelling and sports.**
- 10. Allow a child free and joyful fun. Children have a wonderful sense of taking breaks from grief. Learn from them and try to do so yourself.**

Developmental Stages for Children in Grief

Infants (0 to 1 year old)

Babies can miss and yearn for the sound, smell, sight or feel of a mother or primary caregiver.

Babies who are grieving may become agitated, rock, thrash, cry or knock their heads. They may have difficulty eating and sleeping. They may become sick with colds or indigestion.

How to Help

- 1. Give a lot of physical contact and reassuring attention to the baby.**
- 2. Maintain a baby's routine for physical needs: i.e. feedings, sleep schedules, walks, play time.**
- 3. Hold the baby gently while the baby is agitated and crying. While the baby cries, you can say in words or in your touching and holding of the baby, "I love you. I am right here. I am sorry it hurts." Avoid, "It will be alright. You don't have to cry because I am here," etc. Let the child cry until the child is finished and comes to a place of peace.**

WHEN TO REFER GRIEVING CHILDREN TO A PROFESSIONAL COUNSELOR

A child's grieving is a child's healthy response to a loss. However, the manifestations of a child's grief can resemble the symptoms of some childhood physical and emotional disorders, for example, depression, anxiety, Attention Deficit, physical illness and conduct disorder. It can be difficult to discern when to refer a child to a professional counselor and when to be patient and support a child's natural grieving process.

A Child's Grief Symptoms

Feeling

Sadness

Anger

guilt/self-reproach

anxiety/fear

loneliness

relief

absence of feeling

hopelessness

Physical

Fatigue

sleep disturbance/more or less

appetite disturbance/more or less

unexplained pain/headaches, stomachaches

prone to illness

accidents

shortness of breath

tight muscles

Cognitive

short-term memory loss

inability to concentrate

temporary loss of sequential thinking

confusion

hallucinations

preoccupation

Behavior

social withdrawal

avoidance of difficulties

hyperactivity

crying easily

day-dreaming

combative/acting out prone to

perfectionism/trying to be good

compulsive caring for others

self-destructive

Professional Intervention should be used when a child needs to redirect his/her grieving process away from behaviors that are causing further harm to the child or to others. Refer to a professional counselor when:

1. The way the child is coping with his/her grief adds further trauma to a child's life, for example, when a child is shoplifting, flunking, being anorexic or abusing drugs/alcohol.
2. The child's grief symptoms are persisting for a long time and in a profound way, for example, when a sleep disturbance becomes chronic insomnia. (Keep in mind that some grief does not begin in a serious way until after certain other events have been completed, such as the trial process for a murder or a custody battle – these events can take years.)
3. The child talks about committing suicide. (Suicidal ideation is common in grieving children, often representing a wish to be with the one who died. This wish may or may not be life-threatening. It is wise to follow-up with a professional suicide assessment.)

Helping Students Cope with Grief

Cathy Lindsey, KDE

Recommendations from Melinda Simpson a grief counselor with Hospice of the Bluegrass:

- Be aware of deaths in your community and if there are any student connections to these deaths.
- Be careful not to minimize a student's relationship with the deceased.
- Privately let the student know you are aware of the loss and offer condolences.
- Realize that this death will have a ripple effect throughout the student's family. Many times a family's basic ability to provide food, shelter, supervision and other needs can be compromised by a death.
- Prepare classmates for the return of the bereaved student. Educate the class about the grief process. Make sure students have the facts about the death and squelch any rumors.
- Watch for personality changes, work habit changes, inability to concentrate, depression or increased hyperactivity.
- Understand that it can be hard to concentrate on academics when a family member dies. Be patient and understanding, and initiate arrangements to help the student, if necessary. Bereaved students and parents may be too overwhelmed with grief to arrange for help with school.
- Research local resources to assess the availability of bereavement counseling. Hospice bereavement services vary by program area. Although all Hospice chapters may not provide in-school services, many will be able to provide printed information and referrals to other counseling services.
- School professionals also should assess the interest level of students and parents before arranging for counseling services. Not all bereaved people want counseling.
- Schools also should be able to provide a private meeting place for grief groups. Students should feel comfortable sharing freely for counseling services to be effective.
- Learn about the grief process and the differences between child and adult grief. Realize that grief is extremely individual and everyone will react differently.
- Learn the symptoms of grief and realize that sometimes they can complicate the learning process.
- Ask the student regularly how he/she is doing,
- Realize that shock and numbness are normal for several weeks or months after a death.
- Understand that there is not a timetable for grief. A student can experience an intensification of grief feelings at different stages of life. Holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, etc., often trigger intense grief responses.
- Never use the memory of a deceased parent or caregiver as motivation for a student to change behavior.

For more information, go to www.americanhospice.org/griefzone/kids.htm

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