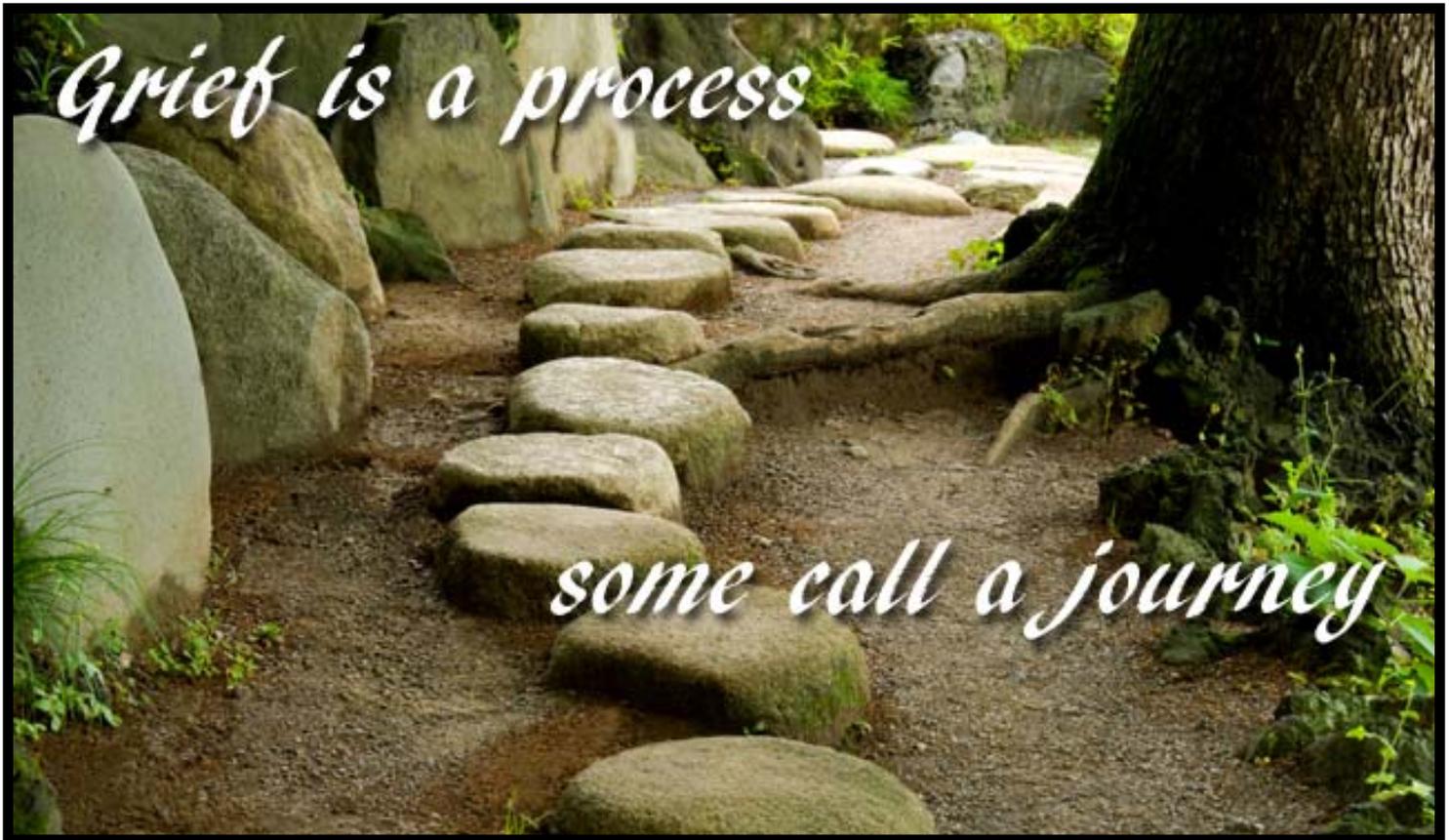


*Crisis, Grief, and  
Mending Hearts:  
A Resource Manual*



Mrs. Patrice Davis, Intervention Supervisor  
251.972.8525  
[pdavis@bcbe.org](mailto:pdavis@bcbe.org)

"A cut finger  
is numb before it bleeds,  
it bleeds before it hurts,  
it hurts until it begins to heal,  
it forms a scab and itches until  
finally, the scab is gone and  
a small scar is left where  
once there was a wound.

Grief is the deepest wound you  
have ever had.

Like a cut finger,  
it goes through stages and  
leaves a scar."

Doug Manning  
*Don't Take My Grief Away From Me*

# 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 house plants.
- 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. Give 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 movie.

# Grief Guidelines for Parents of Grieving Children

1. As soon as possible after the death, set time aside to talk to your child.
2. Give your child the facts in a simple manner. You don't have to give them more information than they ask, but don't lie about the cause of death. It will only complicate matters for you and your children later when they do find out.
3. If you can't answer their questions, it's OK to say, "I don't know how to answer that, but perhaps we can find someone to help us."
4. Use the correct language—say the word "dead." Do not use phrases such as: "He's sleeping," or "God took her away," or "He passed away."
5. Explain your feelings to your child, especially if you are crying. Give them permission to cry, too. We are their role models and it's appropriate for children to see our sadness and to share our feelings with them.
6. Use the given name of the deceased when speaking of him or her.
7. Understand the age and level of comprehension of your child. Speak to that level.
8. Talk about feelings such as sad, angry, feeling responsible, scared, tearful, worried, etc.
9. Read a book on childhood grief so that you have a better understanding of what your child may be experiencing.
10. Talk about the viewing and funeral. Explain what happens at these events, and find out if your child wants to attend.
11. Think about ways your child can say "goodbye" to the person who has died.
12. Invite your child to come back to you if he or she has more questions or has heard rumors. Tell your child that you will help get the correct information.
13. Talk about memories—good ones and not so good ones.
14. Watch out for "bad dreams." Are they occurring often? Talk about the dreams.
15. Friends, family, schoolmates, etc. frequently find solace and comfort in doing something in the name of the person who died, i.e., a memorial.
16. You might see some of the following:
  - Tearfulness
  - Irritability
  - Clinginess

- Whiney moods
- Somatic complaints (i.e., stomach aches, headaches)
- Difficulty concentrating
- Grades may dip temporarily
- More pronounced fears about dying themselves, or you dying, or of the dark
- Regression in behavior
- Aggressive behavior

These are normal emotions; however, if you ever feel they are more extreme or lasting longer than you think they should, never hesitate to consult a professional.

17. Offer your child loving, touching support.

# Death: What to Say and Not to Say

From: TLC Group—PO Box 28551—Dallas, TX 75228

*Although many people want to comfort and help the bereaved, the stress and anxiety of the encounter sometimes makes it difficult to know what is actually helpful. Often, the phrase that is meant to help actually produces more pain and distress. What follows is a partial list of phrases that have been found to be helpful (or hurtful) in comforting the grieving person.*

## WHAT TO SAY

I'm sorry.

I'm sad for you.

How are you doing with all this?

I don't know why it happened.

What can I do for you?

I'm here and I want to listen.

Please tell me what you are feeling.

This must be hard for you.

What's the hardest part for you?

I'll call you tomorrow.

You must really be hurting.

It isn't fair, is it?

You must really feel angry.

Take all the time you need.

Thanks for sharing your feelings.

## WHAT NOT TO SAY

I understand how you feel.

Death was a blessing.

It was God's will.

It all happened for the best.

You're still young.

You have your whole life ahead of you.

You'll feel worse before you feel better.

You can have other children.

You can always remarry.

Call me when I can help.

Something good will come out of this.

At least you have another child.

He (She) led a full life.

It's time to put it behind you now.

Be strong!

# Talking To A Grieving Child: A Guide for Classroom Teachers

From Living with Grief: Children, Adolescents, and Loss, edited by Kenneth J. Doka

## **Be simple and straightforward.**

A simple statement such as, "I'm sorry your Mom died," is much more effective and heartfelt than a long, fruitless attempt to comfort. Avoid euphemisms and use a normal tone of voice.

## **Listen and respect the child's feelings and fears.**

Allow the child the right to his or her grief. You will not make children feel better by denying their feelings. Instead, allow them a safe place to talk. Help them identify people who can help them.

## **Be patient with repetition.**

As they tell the story of their loss, it helps make it more real.

## **Be sensitive to the child's feelings of being different.**

Extend attention carefully. Many children will resent being singled out. Be aware of classroom activities, such as creating gifts for mothers or fathers, that can accentuate loss and feelings of isolation. Such projects can be easily reframed as creating a gift for a special person.

## **Give the child a sense of control.**

In extending support, give the child options on how you can best help.

## **Recognize that grief can affect schoolwork.**

Grief not only affects the ways children feel but the way they think and behave. They may need a little more time or support during this time period. You may have to help them set priorities and solve any difficulties that may arise as their family copes with loss. At the same time, recognize that children do have a need for a constant sense of structure, as their own lives may feel more chaotic in the aftermath of this loss.

## **Watch for manifestations of problems and refer if necessary.**

Students exhibiting problems such as accidents, substance abuse, truancy, self-destructive behaviors, apathy, aggressiveness, delinquency, or significant changes in behavior or performance ought to be referred to a mental health professional. **The Amelia Center [(205) 251-3430]** offers free, confidential individual grief counseling.

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## **About The Amelia Center**

The Amelia Center is a Birmingham, AL based non-profit organization that serves as a comprehensive community grief-counseling center. The Amelia Center is a support service of Children's Health System and is a United Way of Central Alabama agency. The Amelia Center provides individual and family grief counseling services at no charge to individuals. Our services also include loss-specific facilitated grief support groups, Critical Incident Stress Management response teams that serve schools throughout the state of Alabama when there has been a death, and we offer a variety of training and workshops in the area of bereavement and loss-related topics.

For additional information about The Amelia Center, please visit our website at [www.ameliacenter.org](http://www.ameliacenter.org) or call our office at (205) 251-3430.

**Excerpts from**  
***150 Facts About Grieving Children***  
by Erin Linn © 1990

- (1) Death in a child's life is inevitable and unavoidable. The incidence of death experiences in children's lives is obvious. Almost every child will experience the death of a significant other, be it a pet, friend, or relative. More dramatically, about 1 out of 20 will experience the death of a parent by age 18. In an average size school, about every 3-4 years a child can be expected to die, affecting the lives of the child's friends, schoolmates, teachers, and family.
- (4) Children grieve differently at different ages. As they mature, they have to re-work their grief. For example, a daughter will grieve differently at 13 for her mother who has just died than she will at 25 when has just had her first child and becomes a mother herself.
- (15) Give children honest information about death based on their level of maturity. Don't assume that children are too young to understand, and don't worry that they will be scarred for life by anything that you say to them regarding death. They will process what they can understand, and what they can't understand will probably be brought up again at a later date.
- (20) It is important for the child that the family talks as a group about the loss, especially if the person who died is a close family member. Sharing memories is a healthy part of healing.
- (30) Children are often forced to use the coping behavior that their parents use, even though this way of coping may not be right or healthy for the child. For example, a parent may feel that the best way to cope with the loss is to remove all pictures and belongings of the deceased, whereas the child may find the grief work inhibited by being denied these items that give great comfort.
- (49) Children are not usually aware that adults have many of the same feelings that they do regarding grief...or that other bereaved children share their feelings. Grief has a way of isolating young and old alike into thinking they are the only ones having these painful feelings. Thus, there is a tendency to try to endure these feelings in silence.
- (50) Children need to know that their feelings are normal grief feelings, even though they may not be normal under any circumstances. For instance, anger at God or severe guilt is normal. It is when these feelings persist for many months that concern should be acted upon.
- (55) Because society tends to rally around the adults when a family member dies, the children involved may consciously or unconsciously deny the validity of their own loss. They may see their own grief as not justifiable, and may not begin their own grief process for many years to come...or maybe never.

- (88) Often a later, less significant loss, such as the loss of a pet turtle, can open a floodgate of tears and grief. The bereaved child is really grieving over the loss of a significant person who died. Unconsciously, transferring this grief to a pet or inanimate object is far less threatening. This is as healthy a way as any for the child to get these painful feelings out.
- (89) To many, the strong feelings of grief in children are unbelievable and may be discounted. The term "the forgotten mourners" is often applied to grieving children because our society has been very slow to recognize that children do grieve and with the same intensity as adults.
- (100) Most bereaved children like to remember and talk about the deceased with friends and relatives. Unfortunately, there is a phenomenon called "the conspiracy of silence" that makes it difficult for others to talk about the dead person because they are afraid of hurting the bereaved person's feelings. The bereaved person, on the other hand, has hurt feelings when people won't talk about the deceased with them. It is a "catch-22" situation.
- (120) For many children, it is hard to go back to school after the loss of a loved one because of the unknown reactions they will get from classmates and teachers. They do not know if they will be swamped with sympathy or ignored altogether. It is important that re-entering is a positive experience for the child because a child's classmates may well be the closest social circle the child has.
- (139) Most bereaved children are not looking to adults to take away their grief as much as they are looking for validation of their grief and encouragement that they will get through it.
- (143) Children have a great deal of emotional strength that most adults do not give them credit for. Many children would fare far better than their adult counterparts were it not for the anxieties placed upon them by the adults around them.
- (150) As they say in Alcoholics Anonymous, "A cucumber can become a pickle, but a pickle can never become a cucumber again." After a significant loss, every bereaved child is forever changed; forever different. In most cases, this is a positive change. They will never know the innocence that they knew before, but maybe this isn't all bad. Wiser for the experience, most bereaved children grow up to be wonderfully well-adjusted adults.

## Family Influence on the Child's Behavior in the Face of Loss

The child's response to loss must be viewed in the family context. The family system governs much of what the child knows and learns about sickness, death, and loss.

### Family Styles of Dealing With Loss

1. **The family who rejects the loss.** Death and loss are never discussed in some families. The child, however, senses a dread but knows it is taboo to ask about what is happening in the family. Parents rationalize their behavior by stating that the child is too young to understand or what the child doesn't know won't hurt him or her.
2. **The family who blames someone for their situation.** The ethos of some families is that of finding fault. All behaviors are viewed in cause and effects terms. The key themes of family interaction is "Who did this?" or "It's your fault." Guilt is the force used to socialize the child. In reality, the guilty power is usually associated with unresolved guilt in the parents. Common to such families is rigidity, control, and inflexibility.
3. **The family who avoids deep, meaningful relationships.** In this type of family, the parents want family life, but are fearful of intimate relationships. This behavior is based on their need to avoid the pain of loss when a member leaves the family nest. The emotional tone of this family is "cool." Children are seldom if ever kissed and hugged and they are not encouraged to kiss or hug parents or siblings.
4. **The family who must carry on in the face of loss.** The family tends to deny or delay expression of feelings because loss is not acknowledged in the family system. The value of the individual members is not in who they are as persons, but in the role they play in the family constellation.
5. **The family who sees loss as chaotic.** This type of family generally exists in a borderline condition. They have few, if any personal or financial resources, and they depend on social agencies to care for them. The child in this family is usually stressed by parental discord.
6. **The family who attempts to handle crisis.** This family may be unable to handle the crisis at hand, but they recognize their limitations and attempt to find help, especially for the children. This family is very aware of the children's needs and searches for their responses. This family tries to provide opportunities for the children to grieve and express their feelings.
7. **The family who maintains open relationships.** Children from this type of family have learned to tolerate both the negative and positive aspects of human relationship.

Intimacy is held in high priority. When difficulties are a part of family life, the parents and children can make progress toward adaptation. Children may hurt at times, but they are not scarred by the experience.

(adapted from *Anatomy of Bereavement* by Beverly Raphael)

# Outline for Letter to Parents

When your school suffers a loss, students are apt to talk about it when they get home. It is very helpful for parents to know basic information at times like these. Here are some items to cover in letters sent home:

- Begin with a statement of regret. "We had sad news at our school today."
- Tell basic facts about the tragedy. "We learned of the death of one of our students, \_\_\_\_\_, who was in \_\_\_\_\_'s \_\_\_\_\_ grade class. He/she died \_\_\_\_\_ (tell cause of death) \_\_\_\_\_ (when)."
- Give information about what the school did to help students process. "We had the help of additional counselors from our feeder schools, who helped teachers announce the sad news with the students. They also staffed a room for students to go if they needed a little extra time for talking or processing."
- If details of the family funeral or an in-school memory event are known, give information about that. "The family funeral is at \_\_\_\_\_ o'clock on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_. Students who wish to attend will need to bring a note of permission from a parent." Address transportation—will the school provide or do parents need to make those arrangements for their own children?
- Consider whether your students are young enough that adult supervision and support is advisable (which would always be through middle school). If so, make the suggestion to parents that students need an adult for every three or four students attending the funeral. This does not apply to the school memorial event.
- Let parents know who the school contact person is if they have questions.
- Include a section or print a flyer on the back of the letter on how to support their children:
  - This event might bring up questions, concerns, or fears for your child.
  - Be sensitive about whether he/she is needing/wanting to talk.
  - Bring it up in case he/she is reluctant to do so.
  - Ask about his/her reactions to this, and **accept those feelings as stated**. Resist the temptation to minimize the pain, deny the feelings, or give advice. **Simply listen!** Helpful responses on your part include:
    - "Tell me more about that."
    - "Have you ever felt that way before?"
    - "I wonder if there are other things that are worrying you?"
    - "What are other students saying or fearing about this?"
  - Be concrete and brief in your answers, especially with younger children. Allow some silence and processing time after a statement.
  - **Do not compare death with sleep or any other state of consciousness.** Sleep is a regenerative process necessary to health. Death is a loss of all life and regenerative processes. Some children may end up sleep deprived because of fear that they'll die, too, if we use this comparison.

- Allow for regressive behaviors. Children might need to sleep close to an adult for a while. Bedwetting, clinging to adults, or other regressive behaviors are not uncommon.
- Be especially emotionally available and non-judgmental.
- Realize that children move in and out of the grief process, but it is very intense for them when they're experiencing the sadness/anxiety/fear. Encourage them to go out and have fun, get noisy, be active, and celebrate life in whatever way they can. Those periods of reprieve are important in sustaining health and in recovery. Allow them to move in and out of grieving at their own pace.
- Remember the importance of humor, laughter, joking.
- Let parents know how they will get updated information, if needed.
- If you are going to have a parent meeting (which is especially helpful in cases of suicide, murder, missing kids, or other traumatic events) put in the time and place of the meeting and who will be presiding/presenting. Often parents attend in greater numbers when you describe this as a time to be educated rather than a meeting for parents who are concerned that their children aren't coping well.
- If there is something that parents are going to join in doing, such as a fundraiser to help the family, or organizing some effort on the family's behalf, give those details.

## SAMPLE LETTER TO BE SENT HOME TO PARENTS/ GUARDIANS

Date

Dear Parents:

As many of you know by now, \_\_\_\_\_, one of our students, died this week as a result of her battle with cancer.

This has been a difficult time for our students, faculty and staff.

We met with students this morning, and counselors were available throughout the day to help our students, faculty, and staff cope with this terrible tragedy. We will continue to have counseling available to help our students in the coming days.

\_\_\_\_\_’s death brings up many questions for our students about life, death and grieving. This would be a good opportunity to share with your child your beliefs about death and dying and offer support in the midst of his or her grief. As you are aware, we are a small, close-knit community, and \_\_\_\_\_’s death impacts all of us, even those who may not have been close to him.

Your child may experience difficulty eating or sleeping. He or she may also experience nightmares and fears about personal safety. Likewise, your student may experience difficulty in concentration and be more sensitive than usual. These are normal effects of grief and should pass within a short while. If these symptoms are intense and last for a long period of time, please let us know.

The Amelia Center, a grief counseling center that is a department of Children’s Health System, is available to help with any questions you may have regarding the grief process. The Amelia Center offers individual and counseling and support groups at no charge to families. The Center’s telephone number is 251-3430 or you may visit the website at [www.ameliacenter.org](http://www.ameliacenter.org).

We will let you know about funeral or memorial service plans as they become available.

Sincerely,

Principal

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### **About The Amelia Center**

The Amelia Center is a comprehensive community grief-counseling center. The Amelia Center is a department of Children's Health System and is a United Way of Central Alabama partner. The Amelia Center provides individual and family grief counseling services at no charge to individuals. Our services also include loss-specific grief support groups, Critical Incident Stress Management response teams that serve schools throughout the state of Alabama when there has been a death, and we offer a variety of training and workshops in the area of bereavement and loss-related topics.

For additional information about The Amelia Center, please visit our website at [www.ameliacenter.org](http://www.ameliacenter.org) or call our office at (205) 251-3430.

## Sample Letter to Parents

When there has been a death in the school community  
from the Center for Grieving Children  
cgcmaine.org



Dear Parents:

I regret to inform you of the death of [insert full name and nickname] a child who attended/a teacher from our school.

[insert a brief factual description of what occurred] Jane Doe, a sixth grader, was suddenly killed as she stepped off the school bus.

Cards and notes may be sent to her family at:  
[Contact information approved by the family]

Funeral arrangements are as follows:  
[Information on viewing and the funeral]

When we learned of Jane Doe's death, we decided to share this information with the children. It was important for all the children to have the same information to avoid rumors, which start so quickly. The facts were written down for each teacher to read to the class. Counselors and crisis response teams were on hand to visit each class, offering the children a time to talk and to share feelings. Children who were most upset were taken aside for individual discussion and will be closely monitored. Special groups will be formed to give some of the children more time to adjust to this tragedy. Our plans for a school memorial are:

[Add information on school memorial]

Your child may experience grief and you may see some of the following emotions:

- Tearfulness
- Dreams – some of them scary
- Irritability
- Clinging to you
- Whiny moods
- Physical complaints – stomachaches, headaches, etc.
- Inability to concentrate
- Change in appetite
- Temporary dip in grades
- More pronounced fears of dying, of the dark, of you dying, of walking home alone, etc.
- Regressive behaviors such as reverting to thumb-sucking, bed wetting, etc.

Listed below are some ideas that can help your child with grieving:

- Let your child talk about the death or draw pictures of what he or she felt happened.
- Acquaint yourself with the grief process by reading a book on the subject. Among many fine books on the subject are
  - The Grieving Child by Helen Fitzgerald;
  - Talking about Death to Children by Earl Grollman; or

- The Grieving Teen by Helen Fitzgerald.
- Use Jane's proper name
- Use the correct language when talking about death – say "dead" instead of she's "passed on" or "We've lost her" or "she's gone to a better place."
- Let them express their feelings
- Offer them loving, touching support.
- Allow them to be sad and cry and it's okay to let them see you be sad and cry as well.
- Let your child ask questions and answer them as simply as you can. If you need to, it's okay to say, "I don't know how to answer that. Perhaps we can find someone who can help us."
- Talk about dreams as they happen. If you wait until morning they may be forgotten.
- Reassure your child you are healthy, you are careful when you drive, and you will be around for a long time.
- Explain the funeral and viewing arrangements and allow their participation as much as they want.
- Offer support and structure in completing homework.

If your child has experienced a recent loss, this may bring up more feelings about that loss as well. Please call our guidance person to alert them to this possibility.

Sincerely,

[Adapted from Grief at School](http://www.americanhospice.org/grief-at-school-mainmenu-34) <http://www.americanhospice.org/grief-at-school-mainmenu-34> – A Manual for School Personnel, American Hospice Foundation. Pp. 20-21



## Elberta Elementary School

Tel: 251-986-5888  
Fax: 251-986-3664

25820 U.S. Hwy. 98  
P.O. Box 430  
Elberta, AL 36530

October 5, 2011

Dear Parents:

It is with great sadness that I send this letter informing you of the death of [REDACTED] the father of [REDACTED]. As the school counselor, I was in your child's class today to discuss ways that we could offer support to the bereaved classmate and to encourage your child to discuss their feelings with me, their teacher, Mrs. Ford or you.

Below are some suggestions that may assist you in talking with your child about death should they have questions.

- Encourage your child to express and share his/her feelings. Acknowledge and validate the child's feelings. If your child does not want to discuss the topic, don't force it.
- Answer any questions about death with clear, honest and age-appropriate information.
- Openly discuss your family's spiritual belief about death.
- Be aware that a tragic event can sometimes trigger memories of a former loss. Therefore, be prepared to answer questions that may surface related to any losses that your child has experienced in their past.

Finally, do not hesitate to contact me if I may be of assistance to you or your child as a response to this situation. Your thoughts and prayers on behalf of this family are appreciated.

Sincerely,

Sonja Blount



## Elberta Elementary School

Tel: 334-986-3663  
334-986-5888  
Fax: 334-986-3664  
Email: elbelem@gulfnet.com

25820 US Hwy. 98  
P.O. Box 430  
Elberta, AL 36530

February 20, 2004

Dear Parents:

It is with great sadness that I send this letter informing you of the death of [REDACTED], the mother of kindergarten student, [REDACTED] and second-grader, [REDACTED]. As the school counselor, I was in your child's class today to discuss the facts surrounding this tragic event and to encourage your child to discuss his/her feeling with either myself, their teacher or with you, the parent. Additionally, we also discussed ways that we could offer support to the bereaved classmate.

Below are some suggestions that may assist you in talking with your child about death should they have questions. Please do not hesitate to contact me if I may be of assistance to you or your child as a response to this situation.

- \*Encourage your child to express and share his/her feelings. Acknowledge and validate the child's feelings. If your child does not want to discuss the topic, don't force it.
- \*Answer any questions about death with clear, honest and age-appropriate information.
- \*Openly discuss your family's spiritual belief about death.
- \*Be aware that a tragic event can sometimes trigger memories of a former loss. Therefore, be prepared to answer questions that may surface related to any losses that your child has experienced in his/her past.

Sincerely,  
Sonja Blount

\*\*The arrangements for [REDACTED] are as follows:

The wake will be held Saturday at 6:00 PM at Bayview Funeral Home in Foley.  
The funeral will be at Elberta Alliance Church at 2:00 PM on Sunday.



## FAIRHOPE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

408 NORTH SECTION STREET

FAIRHOPE, ALABAMA 36532

Telephone (251) 928-8400

Fax (251) 928-9709



April 20, 2012

Dear Parents

We have had a heavy heart at our school today. Last night, one of Mrs. Corbett's Kindergarten students was in an accident and died.

We had a team of counselors in our school today who shared this sad news with teachers and students. In summary, they...

- Talked to each class and shared that "something" sad had happened and one of our students had died;
- Did not give any specific details because they didn't have any, nor did they have a question/answer time;
- Did say that, at this point, "no-one" knew exactly what had happened;
- Encouraged the children to talk to an adult today if they felt a need too;
- Reminded the students that "we" were the Fairhope Elementary School Family and we wanted them to remember this student in their thoughts/prayers; and,
- Encouraged students to talk to their parents about what had happened.

With that said, please talk with you child as you deem necessary. For some, it may take some time to process; for others, they will move on without a moment's hesitation.

We will have several counselors here again Monday just in case some students need them. If information comes to us that we determine you need, we will pass it along. Most likely, however, you will have access to the same information we will and from the same sources.

Thanks for your help and understanding in the sad and tragic situation and, please, keep this family in your prayers.

Professionally,

Terry Beasley  
Principal

*"Children Need Models More Than They Need Critics"*

## Support Groups

**EASTERN SHORE RECOVERY FOUNDATION** owns and maintains Common Ground/Common Ground Too located on Well Road in Daphne. Over 45 meetings are held at these facilities each week in support of Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, ALANON (family support), SAA and Overeaters. For meeting times and schedules, visit [easternshorerecoveryfoundation.com](http://easternshorerecoveryfoundation.com) or call 251-947-1065.

**DIVORCECARE** and DivorceCare for Kids support groups meet from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Mondays at First Baptist Church Fairhope. For more information, contact Jeff Ingram at 251-928-8685 or visit [fbcfairhope.org](http://fbcfairhope.org). Sessions are weekly, except Labor Day, and end Nov. 22.

**SINGLE AND PARENTING SUPPORT GROUP** meets from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays at First Baptist Church Fairhope. For more information, contact Jeff Ingram at 251-928-8685 or visit [fbcfairhope.org](http://fbcfairhope.org). Sessions are weekly and end on Nov. 15.

**EASTERN SHORE MS SUPPORT GROUP** meets the second Wednesday at 5:30 p.m. at Ruby Tuesday in Fairhope. Family, friends and caregivers are welcome. For more information, call 251-928-7606.

**CENTER FOR AUTISM AND ASPERGER RESOURCES** holds the Central Baldwin Support Group at 6:30 p.m. the third Monday at 158 N. Wren Lane in Robertsdale. Call 251-971-2175 for more information.

**PARKINSON'S ADVOCACY AND SUPPORT GROUP** meets at 10 a.m. the fourth Tuesday at the North Baldwin Wellness Center in Bay Minette. Patients and spouses/caregivers are welcome to the free group. The group is under the direction of Cindy Still at 251-937-7330.

**GOOD GRIEF**, sponsored by Community Hospice of Baldwin County, meets the second and fourth Tuesdays in Lillian. Participation is free, but screening is required. For details, call 251-943-5015, 1-800-342-3196, or 251-937-7330.

**NAMI Baldwin County** meets at 7 p.m. the fourth Tuesday at the Baldwin County Mental Health Center on Fig Avenue in Foley. For details, call 251-955-6264.

**CAREGIVER SHARE GROUP**, sponsored by Community Hospice of Baldwin County, holds meetings the second and fourth Thursdays in Bay

quired. For meeting times and locations, call 251-943-5015.

**GOOD GRIEF**, sponsored by Community Hospice of Baldwin County, meets the second and fourth Thursdays in Bay Minette. Participation is free, but screening is required. For details, call 251-943-5015, 1-800-342-3196, or 251-937-7330.

**INTERSTITIAL CYSTITIS** Support Group of Mobile/Baldwin County meets at 1 p.m. the fourth Thursday at the Spring Hill Branch Library in Mobile. For more information, call 251-580-9498.

**LOVED AND REMEMBERED**, a support group for parents/grandparents who have suffered the death of a child of any age from any cause, meets at 7 p.m. the second and fourth Thursdays. The group meets at the Gulf Shores Church of Christ and there are no membership dues or fees. For details, call 251-943-5015.

**SURVIVORS OF SPOUSES**, a grief group for the younger widowed, meets from 4:30 to 6 p.m. Tuesdays at The Centre in Daphne. Call 251-625-0118 for more information.

**HOPE FOR FAIRHOPE AA** meets at noon Tuesdays and Thursdays at Fairhope Christian Church. For more information, call 251-680-9543.

**AL-ANON** is an anonymous fellowship that helps families and friends of alcoholics learn about the disease of alcoholism and how to cope with its effects. Groups south of Interstate 10 in Baldwin County meet Monday through Saturday. For meeting locations and times, call 888-425-2666.

**SURVIVORS OF SUICIDE** is for anyone who has lost a family member or friend or who has been affected by a suicide. For more information, call 251-979-5705.

**CARE HOUSE** offers support groups for adult survivors of sexual abuse and for caregivers of child victims of abuse. For details and reservations, call 251-580-2546.

**NAMI OF BALDWIN COUNTY** sponsors three weekly support meetings for people with mental illness and their family members and friends. The meetings are at 6 p.m. Tuesdays in Foley at 302 S. Alston St. and at the Bay Minette Public Library and at 6:30 p.m. Thursdays at The Harbor in Fairhope. For more information, call the NAMI office from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday through Friday at 251-965-6264 or Lynn Adams at 251-967-7630.

**GRIEF AND LOSS** groups

following schedule: Children, 4 p.m. Mondays; Adults, 1 p.m. Mondays; Teenagers, 4:30 p.m. Wednesdays.

**NARCOTICS ANONYMOUS** meets at 7 p.m. Mondays at Fairhope United Methodist Church.

**DIVORCE CARE** meets at 4:30 p.m. Mondays at Fairhope United Methodist Church.

**OVEREATERS ANONYMOUS** meets:

■ 6:30 p.m. Mondays at the Holy Spirit Episcopal Church, 616 Fort Morgan Road, Gulf Shores. Call Carla at 251-709-5907 for more information.

■ 10:30 a.m. Mondays at Fairhope United Methodist Church.

■ 6 p.m. Tuesdays and 9 a.m. Saturdays at the Eastern Shore Recovery Foundation in Daphne, 8162 Well Road. Call 251-928-7042.

**SEVERE ANXIETY WITH PANIC ATTACKS** support group meets at 10 a.m. Mondays and 6:30 p.m. Thursdays at Warren Counseling Services. Pre-evaluation is required. Call 251-621-8737.

**FIRST PLACE**, a wellness program designed to balance Bible study, prayer, scripture memory, the support of fellow believers and a healthy eating and physical activity plan, meets at 7 p.m. Mondays at St. Mark's Lutheran Church. For more information, call the church at 251-986-8133.

**HUNGER FOR HEALING**, a spiritual growth group, meets at 5:30 p.m. at the Fairhope Christian Church. It is based on the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous and the 12-step program. This will be a 12-step study of J. Keith Miller's book, "A Hunger for Healing." Call 251-928-8495.

**FRIENDS IN RECOVERY** meets at 6:30 p.m. Wednesdays at Christian Life Church in Orange Beach. "The 12 Steps: A Spiritual Journey" is a road map toward lasting change and healing. Call Trudi Champion at 251-967-4840.

**ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS** beginner meetings are held at The Harbor at Thomas Hospital at 7 p.m. Wednesdays. For more information, call 251-279-1119.

**GOOD MOURNING** grief support group meets two Tuesdays a month. Call Dieter at 251-343-9600 for meeting dates.

**ALATEEN** meetings are open to young Al-Anon members and friends, usually teenagers. Meetings are held at 7 p.m. Wednesdays in the East Tower meeting room at Thomas Hospital, Fairhope. For more information, call

Hospital at 251-279-4008.

**WIDOWED PERSONS SUPPORT GROUP** meets at 9:30 a.m. Thursdays at the James P. Nix Center in Fairhope. For more information, call Lee Green at Covenant Hospice at 251-626-5255.

**PAIN PILL ADDICTION** support group meets Saturdays and Tuesdays at Warren Counseling Services. Pre-evaluation is required. Call 251-621-8737.

**SUBOXONE SUPPORT GROUP** meets at 1 p.m. Saturdays at Warren Counseling Services. Pre-evaluation is required. For more information, call 251-621-8737.

**GRIEF SUPPORT GROUPS**

■ Griefshare is held at 6 p.m. Tuesdays at Christian Life Church, 25550 Canal Road, Orange Beach. Call Trudi Champion at 251-967-4840.

■ Grief Share meets from 6 to 8 p.m. Thursday at Gulfway Assembly, 541 Cotton Creek Drive, Gulf Shores. Call 251-968-6858.

■ Grief Support Group meets at 10 a.m. the first Saturday and 11 a.m. the third Thursday in the library of First Presbyterian Church of Foley. Call 251-943-8325.

■ Grief Support Group meets at 6 p.m. Mondays at the Robertsdale First Christian Church. Call 251-947-7772.

■ Grief Support Group meets from 11 a.m. to noon the first and third Tuesday at Gulf Shores United Methodist Church's South Campus in Room 109. For more information, visit [gulfsupportsumc.org](http://gulfsupportsumc.org) or call 251-968-2411.

# Valuable Reading

## For Teens

### [Healing Your Grieving Heart for Teens](#)

A book that presents different ideas designed to help teens recognize mourning as a natural process connected with loss, reassuring them that they should not be afraid of deep, sometimes uncontrollable emotions, and showing them how to release grief in healthy, positive ways.

### [Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers: How to Cope with Losing Someone You Love](#)

With brief entries such as "Accidental Death," "Self-Inflicted Death," "Talking," "Crying," and "Going Nuts," Grollman offers advice and answers the kinds of questions that teens are likely to ask themselves when grieving the death of someone close.

### [The Grieving Teen: A Guide for Teenagers and Their Friends](#)

Although the circumstances surrounding a death are difficult to handle at any age, adolescence brings with it challenges and struggles that until now have been largely overlooked.

### [When Will I Stop Hurting](#)

Outlining the phases of the grieving process, Myers incorporates into the text numerous personal accounts and quotes from young adults who have experienced the death of a family member.

### [You Are Not Alone: Teens Talk About Life After the Loss of a Parent](#)

Loss is one of the most isolating experiences there is, and children who have lost a parent feel especially different than those around them.

### [Grief Skills for Life: A Personal Journal for Adolescents About Loss](#)

Grief Skills for Life will guide you through the grief process.

### [When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens About Grieving and Healing](#)

The death of a friend is a wrenching event for anyone at any age. Teenagers especially need help coping with this painful loss.

## For Parents and Children

### [Since My Brother Died](#)

In this book, the child talks about how things are different since his brother died.

### [The Empty Place](#)

When a third grader's big sister Jennifer dies, the boy is confused, angry, and scared. For the first time, he must face the awful finality of death and the pain of loss.

### [I Miss You: A First Look at Death](#)

When a close friend or family member dies, it can be difficult for children to express their feelings.

### [Help Me Say Goodbye: Activities for Helping Kids Cope When a Special Person Dies](#)

An art therapy and activity book for children coping with death. Sensitive exercises address all the questions children may have during this emotional and troubling crisis.

### [Brightest Star](#)

A little girl, grieving the death of her mother, finds comfort in looking for the brightest star in the sky to remind her of her mother's love.

### [Gentle Willow: A Story for Children About Dying](#)

Written for children who may not survive their illness or for the children who know them, this tender and touching tale helps address feelings of disbelief, anger, and sadness, along with love and compassion.

### [Sunflowers and Rainbows for Tia](#)

This story is about a child whose father dies at home.

### [Where Are You: A Child's Book About Loss](#)

Where Are You: A Child's Book About Loss is a kind and supportive text with beautiful illustrations designed to help children of all ages cope with the loss of a loved one.

### [Something Small: A Story About Remembering](#)

Finding ways to celebrate and remember someone who has died can provide both comfort and a feeling of connection.

# Resources on Death and Grief

## Children's Books:

- *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf* by Leo Buscaglia, Ph.D.
- *What on Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies?* By Trevor Romain
- *Everett Anderson's Goodbye* by Lucille Clifton
- *Help Me Say Goodbye: Activities for Helping Kids Cope When a Special Person Dies* by Janis Silverman
- *Badger's Parting Gifts* by Susan Varley
- *The Gooby Boat* by Mary Joslin
- *Goodbye Mousie* by Robie H. Harris
- *Gentle Willow: A Story for Children About Dying* by Joyce C. Mills, Ph.D.
- *After the Funeral* by Jane Loretta Winsch & Pamela T. Keating
- *When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understand Death* by Laurie Krasny Brown & Marc Brown
- *What's Heaven?* by Maria Shriver & Sandra Speidel
- *Waterbugs and Dragonflies: Explaining Death to Young Children* by Doris Stickney & Gloria Ortiz Hernandez
- *The Next Place* by Warren Hanson
- *Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children* by Bryan Mellonie
- *Finding a Way Through When Someone Close Has Died: What It Feels Like and What You Can Do to Help Yourself: By Young People, for Young People* by Pat Mood and Lesley Whittaker
- "Mommy, What's Died?" *The Butterfly Story* by Linda Gill
- *Good Grief: A Kid's Guide for Dealing With Change and Loss* by Kim Frank, Ed.S.
- *Children Also Grieve: Talking About Death & Healing* by Linda Goldman
- *Memories Live Forever: A Memory Book for Grieving Children* by Sharon Rugg
- *Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing After Loss* by Pat Schweibert, Chuck DeKlyen, and Taylor Bills

## Books for Parents:

- *Helping Children Cope With the Loss of a Loved One...A Guide for Grownups* by William C. Kroen
- *35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child* by Dougy Center Staff
- *150 Facts About Grieving Children* by Erin Linn
- *When Children Grieve: For Adults to Help Children Deal With Death, Divorce, Pet Loss, Moving, and Other Losses* by John W. James, Russell Friedman, & Dr. Leslie Matthews
- *Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child* by Earl A. Grollman
- *Talking With Children and Young People About Death and Dying* by Mary Turner and Bob Thomas

- Discuss impact of the event. (Suspend regular curriculum for a while when students seem to need to talk. This may fluctuate throughout the day.)
- Ask for coverage for a class if you want a break or if you are feeling overwhelmed.
- Contact the office any time you want support. Help is on the way.
- Prepare a written statement for office staff in order to address any incoming phone inquiries from concerned parents and/or community members.
- Prepare a written statement for counselors when they meet with students.
- Notify students of the death or crisis that has occurred. (This is best done in small groups. Either meet with each grade level of students, or have a counselor to go from room to room to talk with the students. Allow limited time for the students to ask questions.)
- Refer students to the Safe Room should they need to discuss any information in detail, or if they need to talk with counselors, youth pastors, social workers, etc. one-on-one.
- Draft a letter to be sent home with students for parents to notify them about the death and what services are being offered to students and families. Assure parents that crisis teams have been mobilized and support services are available.
- Meet with all faculty and staff members at the end of the school day (after the tragic event).
- At this afternoon meeting:
  - Debrief in order to find out what worked well and what areas are in need of improvement.
  - Provide faculty and staff members with updates or news of plans for funeral arrangements, if known.
  - Determine a game plan for the next school day.
  - Ask what is needed for ongoing support—for teachers, students, the school community.
  - Identify those students who may be in need of some additional support or who may need to be referred to an outside community agency.
- Remind faculty and staff members that all media inquiries should be referred to the Director of Communications.

## Administrative Checklist

- Verify the information (e.g., from family members or local authorities).
- Determine what information the family would like to have disclosed (or what information has already been released publicly from a reliable source).
- Notify the faculty and staff members via the telephone tree (if initial notification occurs outside of school hours).
- Have the school counselor make contact with the Intervention Supervisor.
- Meet with all faculty and staff members on the morning following the tragedy before the start of school.
- At this morning meeting:
  - Discuss what is known about the death; review the facts of the death or crisis and any unique circumstances.
  - Allow teachers to ask questions.
  - Provide an overview of the day's game plan.
  - Introduce any additional counselors, youth pastors, central office staff, etc. that may be available to assist during the school day.
  - Identify where the Safe Room will be located for those students who may need to talk one-on-one with a counselor.
  - Provide guidance on what to say and what not to say to students.
  - Provide guidance on how to handle different questions students may ask.
- At the morning meeting, also talk with teachers about what they are expected to do:
  - Share information with students or be in the classroom when staff support does.
  - Lead a discussion and validate feelings or experiences students have or have had.
  - Keep semblance of schedule, but make accommodations in expectations for academics.
  - Send students to the Safe Room as appropriate.
  - Expect confusion, crying, disruptive behavior; act compassionately.

- Discuss impact of the event. (Suspend regular curriculum for a while when students seem to need to talk. This may fluctuate throughout the day.)
- Ask for coverage for a class if you want a break or if you are feeling overwhelmed.
- Contact the office any time you want support. Help is on the way.
- Prepare a written statement for office staff in order to address any incoming phone inquiries from concerned parents and/or community members.
- Prepare a written statement for counselors when they meet with students.
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  - Provide faculty and staff members with updates or news of plans for funeral arrangements, if known.
  - Determine a game plan for the next school day.
  - Ask what is needed for ongoing support—for teachers, students, the school community.
  - Identify those students who may be in need of some additional support or who may need to be referred to an outside community agency.
- Remind faculty and staff members that all media inquiries should be referred to the Director of Communications.

# Informing Students of a Tragedy

A guideline for such an announcement might be:

Today we received tragic (or sad) news. We learned that one of our students, \_\_\_\_\_, died by \_\_\_\_\_. (Give additional appropriate information about the facts of the event.) When things like this happen, people have all different kinds of reactions, like shock, sadness, fear, and anger. Those reactions may rise and fall throughout the day, and even for days to come. Some of us will want to have quiet time alone and others may want time to talk with peers or adults. Some of you who didn't know \_\_\_\_\_ may be ready for teachers to return to academics sooner than others. We all just need to practice patience and respect for each other.

We can take some time to talk about this now. When most of you are ready to return to learning, those who still wish to talk or think about this may go to the \_\_\_\_\_(library?) which we've set aside so you can gather with friends. (If there are other supervised gathering places, state that here.) You will have to sign out of your class as you leave and sign in to the \_\_\_\_\_ as soon as you arrive. We recognize the need for you to gather with friends to talk, so we are providing (this place) (these places) for you to be. **It is important that all students be in some setting that has an adult present.** If any of you wish to talk one-on-one with the school counselor, she will be in her office and will see students during the day.

The school day will remain on schedule, but teachers in any class may suspend regular classroom activities in order to allow you to talk about this event. Let us know how you're doing as we move throughout the day.

At this point we know the following about the memorial/funeral arrangements....

**At this point, lead some discussion time.**

We will continue to keep you updated as this unfolds. Further news will come by (give details on how updates will be handled.)

# Directions for Telephone Tree

## Instructions:

When you receive a call about a school crisis, it will be important that you relay the information on to the next people on your list.

If the person following your name does not answer, call those following that name so notification of all is facilitated. Take the responsibility of verifying that the person you could not reach is called repeatedly until contact is made.

The following is the essential information to be passed along, and the manner in which to do so:

- Begin by making one statement or preparation, such as, "I'm sorry to have to call with sad (tragic, difficult) news." This gives the receiver a minute to prepare for hearing something difficult. If you think this person is going to have an especially difficult time hearing the news, considering sharing information in person, or asking whether he/she is alone.
- Don't drag it out...once you've given them the preparation statement, tell them the following:
  - That there has been a death (or tragedy) involving a student (or staff, or whatever) from your building. Then tell who died, when, and the mode of death, if known.
  - Tell the person of the before-school meeting, the time, and that more information will be shared at that meeting.
  - Do not speculate, participate in rumors, or elaborate.
  - Remind that person that, as they call the people behind them on the telephone tree, they also need to adhere to the above outline.

The goal is to allow people to become emotionally prepared for the next day, but to keep from starting or spreading any erroneous information. This is very important.

Because of our need to know, details get distorted very innocently and easily. Our grief is dependent on the circumstances of the death. It is crucial to give exactly the facts and details given you as you proceed to make further calls. It might be wise for each person to write down the message verbatim so it keeps its integrity as it is passed along.

A better alternative than using a phone tree is to have a small group of carefully chosen people do all of the calling so that the messages are all given with the same tone and detail.

# Needed Resources

1. School Map
2. Faculty/Staff Roster with room numbers
3. Kleenex
4. Crayons
5. Typing paper
6. Pencils
7. Markers
8. Pens
9. Sign in/Sign out sheet
10. List of community resources/support groups
11. Age appropriate books

\*\*\*Note: These are resources that will be invaluable for support staff who have come to assist a

school during their time of crisis.

# Introductory Questions/Statements

- I'm glad you came in. I'm sorry that this happened to you (or name of the school).
- How did you know \_\_\_\_\_? How did you learn of \_\_\_\_\_'s death?
- Yes, what happened is terrible. Things may never seem the same, but it can be OK again.
- Did you know \_\_\_\_\_ or are you feeling sad about another death?
- I didn't know \_\_\_\_\_. Can you tell me about \_\_\_\_\_ and what he/she was like?
- What are some of your favorite memories of \_\_\_\_\_? What will you miss most?
- What is the most painful part about this right now?

Phrases to avoid:

- I know how you feel.
- He/she led a good, long life....It was God's will.....
- At least he/she didn't suffer. She's in a better place.
- You'll feel better later. He/she wouldn't want you to be sad.

# Concluding Questions

- What's the hardest part about this right now? What are your greatest fears/concerns?
- What's going to happen when you get home tonight?
- Who is your support system? Are there people you can call?
- If you wake up at night and feel scared, could you wake your parents?
- Who will be there for you at school tomorrow—who can you talk to?
- Is there anything we could do that we haven't thought of?

\*\*\*Note: These are questions and statements that may be asked of those students who decide to talk one-on-one with a counselor in the Safe Room.

# Parental Permission Letter

You may use the letter in its entirety, or you may edit it to fit your needs.

Dear Parents:

I will be conducting a small counseling group for children who have experienced the death of a close family member. During the group sessions, we will discuss feelings we have when we lose someone we love, ways to cope with our loss, and things we can do to feel better. The students will make a memory book with writings and drawings. The group will meet twice a week for three weeks.

If you would like for your child to participate, please sign the form below and return it to my office. If you have any questions, you can reach me at \_\_\_\_\_.

Sincerely,

School Counselor

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I give permission for my child, \_\_\_\_\_, to participate in small group counseling sessions on grief.

Parent's signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

# Dealing With Death at School

Prior planning, empathic leadership, and teachable moments promote healing among students and staff members after the death of a member of the school community.

BY SCOTT POLAND AND DONNA POLAND

**N**early every principal will be faced with the death of a student or faculty member during his or her career. How schools respond to a death can either help or hinder the healing process, and the principal sets the tone for the level of assistance that is provided following a death at school.

## Planning and Preparation

An effective response to a death requires advanced planning. Effective advanced planning increases the likelihood that the trauma will be minimized and that grieving students receive support, ensures that the psychological equilibrium of students and faculty members will be restored as soon as possible, and teaches parents and members of the school community about the signs and symptoms of posttraumatic stress and how and when to refer people for appropriate

treatment (Dwyer & Jimerson, 2002; Jimerson & Huff, 2002).

The components of good advanced planning are consistent with those for any crisis prevention response plan and include establishing a crisis response team, delineating plans and responsibilities, being flexible, communicating effectively, providing training for staff members, educating and involving parents, accounting for potential risks or significant cultural issues within the community, and identifying resources, and coordinating with district and community agencies.

The crisis team should be a diverse group that represents several disciplines. It should design a response plan and review it on an ongoing basis throughout the year. A response plan covers how to verify information and notify the school community, what the initial

interventions will encompass, and what long-term actions are necessary.

## Verification and Notification

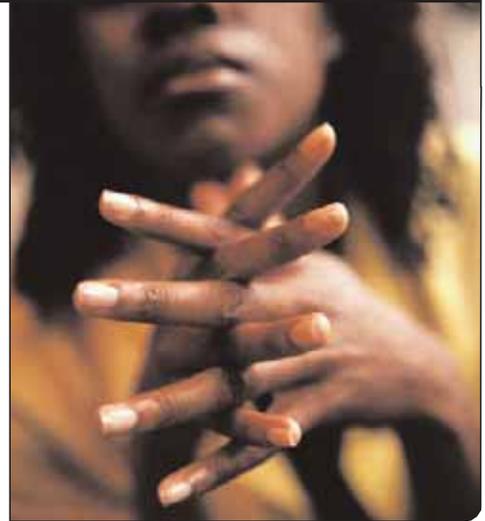
**Verify the facts.** Depending on the circumstances, verifying the facts about a death can be done through the local police agency, the family's faith leaders, or a close friend or relative of the deceased. Do not hesitate to contact the victim's family to get facts and offer assistance; they will appreciate your concern. In the case of an alleged suicide, it is important that the suicide is confirmed by a legitimate source and that the family gives permission to have the death publicly announced as a suicide.

**Convene your crisis team.** Every principal should maintain a crisis file at his or her home that contains updated information and relevant phone numbers. When a member of the school community dies, the principal should convene the crisis team and contact his or her administrative supervisor for support and guidance. Some schools will need the help of additional personnel who have appropriate training because their students may need more support than staff members can provide.

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**Scott Poland** is the director of Psychological Services for the Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District in Houston, TX. **Donna Poland** has more than 20 years of teaching and administrative experience and is currently the principal of Blyel Middle School in Houston, TX.

**Author's note:** Shane R. Jimerson, an associate professor at the University of California at Santa Barbara, and Leland C. Huff, a school psychologist at Huntington Beach (CA) Union High School and NASP's President-Elect for 2004–2005, contributed to this article.



STOCK PHOTO IMAGE

**Assess the potential effect of the death.** To assess the effect a death will have on students and staff members, the following questions should be answered:

- How well-known was the deceased? The death of a popular student or staff member may generate a lot of attention, but it is important to demonstrate systemwide consistency in the way death is dealt with, regardless of the popularity of the deceased individual.
- What was the cause of death? Deaths by homicide, accident, and suicide are unexpected and often create a higher level of emotion.
- Where did the death occur? Deaths that occur on campus are especially traumatic for students and staff members.
- Have there been prior tragedies that have affected the school community? Issues and emotions from previous losses will likely surface, further complicating the processing efforts.
- Was there a perpetrator who caused an accident or committed a homicide? If students and staff members were acquainted with the perpetrator, many additional issues may surface.

**If possible, provide staff members with advance notice.** If a death is verified during nonschool hours, a calling tree can be mobilized to notify staff members so they can process the information and receive support from their friends and significant others, feel included in the notification process, and request assistance (e.g., a substitute teacher) if they cannot carry out their regular duties.

**Coordinate in-school notification.** If school is in session when a death is verified, we recommend the following notification methods:

- A memo, delivered to all classrooms, that contains the facts of the tragedy and provides specific recommendations or a script for teachers to follow that explains what to say to students
- Carefully worded and previously

rehearsed public announcements to students and faculty members

- Contact information for students and staff members
- A moment of silence in memory of the deceased and his or her family
- A letter for students to give to their parents.

**Limit information regarding a suicide.** If the deceased's family approves it, tell staff members and students the truth about the cause of death without giving explicit details. Make no attempt to explain how the deceased died. Such emphasis runs the risk of communicating to vulnerable students that death is a way to obtain incredible amounts of attention. Focus instead on helping students grieve and learning the warning signs of suicide. Small-group or classroom discussions are better than a large school assembly.

**Schedule a staff meeting as soon as possible.** A morning meeting is a good opportunity to provide addi-

tional details regarding the death. Staff members should receive a reminder about everyone's role in the crisis response plan and all school personnel should receive relevant information. A morning meeting can also be an opportunity to evaluate the effect the death may have had on the staff. There may be teachers who are unable to carry out their scheduled duties or provide grief support to students (Jimerson & Huff, 2002).

### Initial Intervention

**Coordinate with the family of the deceased.** Inform the family of the school's plans to provide information and interventions. Make sure that they know what information is being shared and who within the school is designated to answer questions. Determine whether the family would like to be contacted by others and whether and where donations can be sent. Assure the family that they will

## UNDERSTANDING GRIEF REACTIONS

Grieving is a process that everyone experiences differently. When individuals grieve, they bring the unique factors of their family and faith support systems, past experiences with loss or trauma, developmental and cognitive abilities, and any pre-existing mental health problems to the grieving process. Although both individuals and the school community at-large may experience the general stages of grief, they may not necessarily experience these stages in the same timeframe or order. The stages of grief include, emotional numbness, anger, disorganization, bargaining, depression, acceptance.

Grief reactions may affect a student's school performance and his or her behavior at home. Reactions to grief may include denial, anger, sadness, anxiety, fear, confusion, inability to concentrate, difficulty sleeping, and guilt.

The death of a peer can be particularly distressing to students. Although most preadolescents and adolescents have a mature understanding of death (e.g., its irreversibility and universality), they often view themselves as invincible and not subject to the "rules" that govern others. The death of a peer may not only constitute the loss of a classmate but also may point out the reality of his or her own mortality. In addition, young people may have had no experience in coping with death or have unrealistic perceptions of what grief entails because of overexposure to death as entertainment in movies and television (Jimerson & Huff, 2002).

Grief is a normal and necessary response to loss. However, persistent or very intense grief responses may require attention from trained professionals. Individuals should be referred for extra help if symptoms significantly impair functioning or last for more than two months after the loss (Mauk & Sharpnack, 1997).

## RESOURCES

American Association of Suicidology [www.suicidology.org](http://www.suicidology.org)

The Dougy Center for Grieving Children and Teens [www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)

National Association of School Psychologists [www.nasponline.org/principals](http://www.nasponline.org/principals), offers handouts on dealing with the death of a member of the school community, including Dealing With Death at School, Responding to Death: Tips for Administrators and Teachers, and Helping Children Cope With Loss, Death and Grief: Tips for Teachers and Parents.

National Emergency Assistance Team (NEAT) at the National Association of School Psychologists, [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)

National Organization for Victim Assistance [www.try-nova.org](http://www.try-nova.org) or 1-800-TRY-NOVA.

U.S. Department of Education's Project SERV (Schools Emergency Response to Violence) (202) 260-1856

be consulted about plans for honoring or remembering the deceased.

**Provide materials for staff members and parents.** Teachers and staff members should receive information to read to students and guidelines on how to conduct classroom discussions for grieving students. Prepare a packet for parents that includes facts about the death, tips on how to help grieving youth, plans regarding memorial activities, and information about the services the school is providing.

**Be truthful and direct with students.** Students need accurate information and the opportunity to ask questions. They will see through false or incomplete information, which undermines their trust and will not help them grieve or develop long-term coping strategies.

**Protect staff members and students from the media.** Set limits for members of the media and provide them with factual information while protecting the privacy of the victim's family. Also give the media tips for helping grieving students and a list of school and community resources. The media can incorporate these tips into news stories and send positive messages to the community.

**Keep school open during normal hours.** School is a major source

of comfort for most students and staff members in times of crisis. Keeping school open enables students to be together, receive helpful information, benefit from the nurturing and guidance of familiar adults, and maintain a sense of normalcy in their lives. It is important for the principal to be visible and available to staff members, students, and parents, especially during the first few days following the death.

**Establish a support center or "safe" room.** These rooms make it easy for students or staff members to receive support if they have difficulty coping. School-based or community professionals who are trained to work with grieving children and adults should staff these rooms.

**Provide classroom interventions.** Most students can receive all the help they need in the classroom. Teachers can be instrumental in helping students cope with the loss, defuse the effect of the trauma, regain some measure of control, and understand the event. In some cases, it may be necessary to have mental health professionals lead class discussions. Lessons that focus on taking advantage of teachable moments can also help teachers strengthen students' coping skills. Ideally, teachers should already be familiar with these

strategies through staff development training.

**Adjust schedules as necessary.** A death may preempt the regular curriculum in classes that the deceased would have attended. It is not unusual for teachers to want to stick to the standard lesson plan or give a scheduled test. However, this is counterproductive and possibly inappropriate when students are emotionally upset. In many cases, teachers simply need empathic leadership or permission from the principal to allow students and teachers a chance to process the loss.

**Give students opportunities to express their emotions.** Offer a variety of activities because some students will be more comfortable with—and more comforted by—one activity than another. One effective intervention that has been used after school shootings is for the principal to write a letter to each student. The letter gives students permission to express a range of emotions and asks them to write back to let the principal know if they need any assistance. In one school, nearly 100% of the students answered the letter and overwhelmingly asked for more adult involvement in their lives.

**Identify those most at risk.** Students or staff members who were emotionally close to the deceased or were directly exposed to the trauma (e.g., witnessed the death) will need more extensive assistance, preferably separate from those who were not directly exposed. Students who have suffered a previous loss, have a history of mental health problems, or have been exposed to a previous trauma may be particularly at risk. It is important to monitor these students, give them extra support, communicate with their families, and refer them to community resources. Do not hesitate to contact parents of students about whom you are concerned.

**Tailor support services for students with special needs.** Students who have developmental disabilities, emotional disorders, or low self-esteem may require unique forms of support. Some students may have difficulty understanding the finality of death, differentiating their own well-being from that of the deceased, or be disoriented or distressed by the person's absence. It is of primary importance to establish an environment that provides safety and security and reestablishes routine and equilibrium (Jimerson & Huff, 2002).

**Reflect cultural and religious differences.** School personnel should understand various cultural and religious perspectives on death so interventions are appropriate. The cultural background of students may affect their reaction to trauma. Failure to take these cultural issues into consideration can alienate

certain students and hinder the healing process.

**Conduct staff "debriefing" sessions.** Principals should hold a staff debriefing at the end of the first day—and regularly during the next few weeks—to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the crisis plan, get a feel for the health of the school, help identify students and staff members who need help, and modify the crisis plan if needed. Even the best plan will not account for all possible scenarios. Regular staff check-up sessions will provide an opportunity to adjust the plan or additional support services as necessary (Jimerson & Huff, 2002).

#### **Long-Term Follow-Up**

**Consider a memorial activity.** In many cases, memorials can reduce feelings of isolation and promote individual and collective grief resolution. Plan memorials carefully

and involve a committee in the decision-making process. Activities (e.g., a service or raising money to help others) can be more appropriate than a permanent marker or structure. Participation should always be voluntary. If the death was by suicide, we do *not* recommend public memorial gestures.

**Provide ongoing support as necessary.** Because the effects of a tragedy can persist for an extended time, it is important to provide ongoing support to the close friends of the deceased. Staff members should monitor student behavior and understand symptoms of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicide risk. Some students or staff members may have a delayed reaction to their grief. In particular, the "anniversary effect" can reawaken feelings similar to those at the time of loss. We recommend continued coordinated communication between the

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## CASE STUDY

By Donna Poland

## The Morning Before

It was the last day of summer, the day before the teachers returned. As a new principal, I had worked closely with staff members to finalize the master schedule, plan a meaningful staff development week, and ensure an efficient registration and orientation process.

I felt ready. Then, the phone call came. A teacher called to tell me that a student from last year's eighth-grade class, the brother of a current student, had committed suicide the night before. Although I believed I was trained to deal with the unexpected, disorganized thoughts and questions flew around in my head. Why would this boy do such a thing? What does this have to do with me? How can I help? How can I help my teachers deal with this?

Abandoning notions of a smooth beginning to the year, I shifted into managing a campus in crisis. After verifying the facts—and having a brief, painful conversation with the deceased boy's mother—I convened my crisis team. Thankfully, everyone had been given an updated phone tree at the end of the previous year. We informed staff members of the student's death and of our plans to provide follow-up information the next morning on staff development day.

Three needs became obvious. We needed to take care of the grieving teachers and coaches. The deceased boy had attended our middle school for three years, was an extremely popular athlete, and attended a church where many of our staff members and students were active. His death was sure to cause a wave of grief and confusion among his peers, and we needed to take care of the students who attended school with him and his sister, which involved both the middle and the high school. We also needed to support his sister.

## The Morning Of

Clearly, the planned training was no longer appropriate for the staff meeting. Our revised schedule included time to discuss the facts and support for the family, plan for attendance at the service, share the schedule of the surviving sister to enable her teachers to coordinate, prepare counselors and school psychologists at both schools, and provide teachers with immediately usable information. The revised plan also included training on building better relationship and suicide prevention and postvention.

I also worked to ensure that we were providing adequate support for the family and students. I met with the boy's mother, the district's director of psychological services, and the school psychologist assigned to both schools. We referred the mother to community-based services for her family. We reviewed our plan for monitoring the boy's sister and friends and discussed strategies to use when talking with students about suicide. The director of psychological services worked with the family's minister to develop a message that, in the minister's words, would ensure that no child or adult in attendance would "think that suicide is an expressway to Heaven." The minister also emphasized that there are many safe and healthy ways to deal with adversity in our lives.

## The Mornings That Follow

Although we are a large school community, we solicited the help of deceased student's former teachers and made a list of his closest friends who would arrive for their first day of high school without their friend. We called the friends' parents (and those of the boy's sister) to inform them of the support we would be providing for their children. One of our counselors spent the first day of school at the high school to provide a familiar face and source of support for students.

The first weeks of school gave me an opportunity to establish trust and credibility in a very different way than I had originally planned. The challenge remained to stay vigilant in our pledge to watch after the staff members and students as they moved through the school year.

school and local mental health professionals.

**Monitor your own processing and support requirements.** Identify your own coping skills as well as sources of comfort and strength in your life. Check frequently with school personnel who are most affected by the tragedy and do not hesitate to discuss the tragedy at faculty meetings as the need and situation dictate. PL

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