

COMMUNICATION: THE HEART OF THE WORK

Communication is the heart and soul of this work with bereaved children and their families. When teachers help initiate the conversations, they help children gain the skills and confidence to continue them with others.

We encourage teachers to address the topic of death and loss proactively. As described in Chapter 2, it is important to discuss death in a general way with all students before any loss is identified because it provides information and anticipatory guidance around the matter of death and grief. It is also essential for teachers to actively open communication when they know a specific student is experiencing grief. Teachers should not wait for students to approach them. A student may not realize this is an option or feel secure enough in taking the first step.

A vital power differential exists between students and teachers. This is a good thing. It helps teachers offer trusted guidance in learning and maintain order when necessary. This same difference in power makes it difficult for students to approach a teacher with questions about something as troublesome as death, however. This is not so surprising, really. Even adults are often reluctant to tell others about personal experiences of grief. They may hesitate to tell a boss or supervisor about a death, or they may minimize the challenges and distress presented by their grief. Children who observe this deference or hesitation in a parent or other family member might be even more likely to avoid troubling their teacher.

Similarly, however, a teacher's status can open up possibilities with children. Teacher authority communicates experience, wisdom, and an ability to determine what topics are appropriate to discuss. Children are often quite responsive when a teacher suggests they talk about a recent death, and they usually appreciate the opportunity to do so.

Getting Students to Talk

Students may be more likely to discuss a death with a teacher if the circumstances make the topic approachable. Teachers can help set the tone for a conversation by using the following suggestions:

- *Students feel they have permission to talk about their loss.* Children realize that the topic of a death is often uncomfortable for people. They are more likely to feel that they have permission to open these conversations if they already know a teacher is willing to discuss challenging matters. They may remember a teacher saying, "You can always ask me about anything, even if it seems like something difficult." They may know peers who have felt supported when they talked to a teacher about troublesome topics. A teacher can specifically extend an invitation to an individual child to talk about a recent death.
- *Students sense the teacher is listening genuinely.* This means the teacher is emotionally and intellectually present during the conversation and is responding directly to what the student says. Unhelpful comments should be avoided (see the box "What *Not* to Say").

- *Teachers have discussed death, grief, or other difficult topics in the past.* Teachers who have already addressed difficult topics with students have demonstrated their ability to think, listen, teach, and learn about them. Students have confidence that the teacher can handle the conversation personally and will have something useful to offer.

Steps to Invite the Conversation

This section offers some steps that teachers can take to start and sustain communication with grieving students. (More detailed examples of each of these steps are given in Chapter 5.)

- *Express concern.* Let students know directly that you have heard about the death and are thinking about them.
- *Invite the conversation.* Ask a simple, direct question, such as “How are you doing?” This invites students to engage.
- *Listen and observe.* This can take patience. Some students may need time to figure out what they want to say. Some may communicate in nonverbal ways.
- *Offer reassurance.* Feelings of grief may be strong, powerful, surprising, and unfamiliar. It is helpful for students to know that these are typical reactions. It may also be useful for them to understand that the feelings change over time and become easier to experience.
- *Continue to make contact.* Students’ thoughts, insights, and feelings change over time. Many will appreciate ongoing opportunities to talk about the ways their experiences are changing.

These types of interventions give children an opportunity to find their own best way through this process. Such conversations help them make meaning of their loss while continuing to move forward in their lives.

Communication Challenges

In the same way that there are factors that increase children’s likelihood of talking to teachers about grieving and death, there are also reasons why children who are grieving do not readily approach teachers about their loss. For example:

- *Students may feel overwhelmed.* They may not know where to begin. They may feel unable to manage the burden of trying to cope with their own complex feelings while protecting the feelings of others who do not necessarily want to talk about death and grief. They may worry that if they start to express their feelings, they will embarrass themselves by beginning to cry in front of their peers, or, worse yet, be unable to stop crying once they have started.

What to do:

- Initiate a conversation.
- Express your concern and interest.

- Start simply with one or two open-ended questions (i.e., questions that cannot be answered with a single word, such as “yes” or “no”).
- Offer to speak in private outside of class.
- *Students may lack a clear sense of what support would be helpful.* Students may not fully understand what has happened or the implications that the death has for their life. They may not have personal models for seeking support. They may not realize that talking to someone, such as a teacher, would be helpful. In addition, they may not think they have anything to say.

What to do:

- Ask open-ended questions.
- Include some questions that guide students toward useful answers. For example, ask students how they are doing, how their family is doing, what kinds of support they are finding, and so forth.
- *Students may not want to stand out from their peers.* When everything else in their life feels like it is in turmoil, they may want to feel like they are just a regular student, doing regular things. They may be embarrassed at the idea of receiving any sort of special attention.

What to do:

- Offer a private conversation.
- Seek out a one-to-one conversation in a typical setting, such as the playground, a common area, or the classroom during a conference about a homework assignment that every student is having.
- Acknowledge the concern directly. For example, make a statement such as “I’ve sometimes talked to students going through a loss who wish everyone would just treat them normally instead of making a big deal about it. I wonder if you’re feeling like that.”
- *Students may feel more comfortable turning to peers.* Students may not think of teachers as a resource for this kind of support. This is especially true of adolescents.

What to do:

- Acknowledge the importance of receiving support and ask students who they are able to talk to.
- Ask if there is an adult in their lives whom they can talk to about these things.
- Offer to be available if students wish to talk at some future time.

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