

5

Communication

Ways to Make Contact and Keep It Going

WAYS TO MAKE CONTACT

A number of steps can help set a positive foundation for making contact with grieving children. This section highlights four steps that are helpful for teachers.

Make the Commitment

When teachers hear that a student has experienced a loss, they should make the commitment to make contact. If teachers know the student or family well, they should consider contacting the family at home by telephone after first hearing about the death to offer condolences and support. It is important to remember that even when teachers do not know students well, expressing condolences and acknowledging the loss can be very powerful and helpful. It will also make it much easier for students to return to class when they know that their teachers are already aware and ready to provide appropriate support.

Find (or Create) the Opportunity to Talk

Usually, this is a private conversation, so it is best if teachers can find a moment when they can interact with the student one-to-one. Perhaps the student could be approached privately before or after class, in common areas of the school, or in some other setting. Teachers might also choose a regular school activity that provides one-to-one contact, such as while discussing a report or project. The student could also be asked to come in a little early or stay after other students have left for a break.

If teachers do not work directly with the student and do not have an opportunity for a one-to-one conversation, they can approach the student more generally and express concern. For example, a teacher might approach a student sitting with a couple of friends and say, "It's good to see you back at school. You and your family have been in my thoughts."

Offer Condolences and Support

A simple expression of concern and caring lets students know that their teachers are aware of their situation and thinking of them. The following are some examples of condolences and offers of support that teachers have made to students:

- "I'm sorry to hear about your father."
- "I just wanted to let you know you've been in my thoughts. I am sorry about your brother's death."
- "I'm glad to see you back here at school. I was thinking about you while you were at your mom's funeral."
- "How are you doing? I've been wondering how things have been for you since your grandmother's death."

Students' responses to these offers of condolence and support can guide teachers. The most important thing teachers are offering in this first contact is a compassionate presence, that is someone who is willing to provide support if students want or need it. It is important to listen, but it is not necessary to force a discussion. Remember, there is nothing anyone can say or do that will take away the pain or the loss. What people who are grieving usually find most helpful is someone who can listen openly to whatever they have to say.

Promote Ongoing Communication

Students who are interested in talking more may ask questions, talk about their experiences, or keep the conversation going in other ways. Teachers should continue to be guided by their comments. Students' questions should be answered in simple, age-appropriate ways. Some questions may need to be answered many times, especially (but not only) with younger children.

Teachers should offer honest answers to questions. Often, "I don't know the answer" is the best response. Teachers should also be mindful about using

euphemisms and remember that it is okay, even preferable, to use the terms *dead* and *death*. Responses should be open and nonjudgmental. It is important for students to feel that they can honestly express their thoughts and feelings to their teachers. They may not have similar opportunities at home if they feel they must protect a grieving parent.

Children often do not have a sense of what they want to say or what would be helpful, so teachers should ask open-ended questions that give students an opportunity to share more about their experience if they wish. The following are some examples of open-ended questions teachers have used that keep communication going:

- “How have you been doing over the past couple of weeks?”
- “How’s your Mom (sister, brother, family) doing?”
- “What’s it like coming back to school?”
- “What has this past week been like for you?”
- “What sorts of things are you thinking about these days?”

As mentioned in Chapter 4, teachers may also recognize that some of the questions children ask are essentially rhetorical—they do not need a direct answer. They express a sort of philosophical dilemma about human suffering, rather than a search for concrete answers. Even elementary school-age children might ask questions, such as, “Why do people have to die?” “Why couldn’t it have been somebody else’s mom?” “Why do we even bother loving people if they’re just going to die?”

Questions such as these often benefit from comments that give students opportunities to continue expressing frustration, confusion, and pain. The following are some examples of responses that can keep communication going if students make these kinds of comments:

- “It’s really hard to understand why these things happen.”
- “So many things about death don’t seem to make any sense at all.”
- “I can only imagine this loss leaves you with a lot of confusion and questions.”
- “You’re asking the questions everyone asks when someone they love dies. It’s hard to make sense of it.”

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