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When an Entire School Is Affected

GOALS OF SUPPORT

It is important for schools to set up a system for offering students *and* staff support. This includes having school staff and/or consultants who have experience and skills in providing support after a school crisis and who are available to talk with staff and students in both group and individual settings.

The goals of support for students include the following:

- *Normalize common experiences of grief.* Anticipatory guidance helps students understand what to expect. They can hear about the range of feelings that are common in these circumstances, the ways people might express their feelings, and the ways people's feelings may change in the short and long term (i.e., the coming days, weeks, and months).
- *Help students express and cope with feelings.* Following a death, talking with students directly helps them to understand what happened and to identify their feelings. They need a safe, nonjudgmental environment in which to express their reactions. In groups, they can learn coping strategies and share their own ideas. These interventions keep more students present in school at these difficult times and decrease the negative effects on learning that often accompany grief.

- *Help students find resources and strategies for coping with difficult feelings.* Many students will experience straightforward reactions to the death that are clearly expressed and match the situation well. Some, however, will have more complicated reactions. They may struggle with feelings of regret or remorse, especially if they believe they mistreated the individual at some point in the past. Others may have a sense of survivor guilt—“Why should he have been the one to drown when we’ve all gone swimming out at the quarry?” They may feel anxious, fearful, or angry. As previously mentioned, depressed students may experience a worsening of symptoms. Students may also feel despair or have thoughts of suicide.

Talking with a mental health professional with expertise in bereavement or crisis can help students with troublesome feelings find productive ways to express and cope with them. They can also find resources for ongoing support if the difficult feelings seem dangerous in any way (e.g., thoughts of suicide) or do not resolve within a reasonable period of time.

- *Clarify concepts for younger students.* Younger students may have more difficulty understanding death. They are more likely to misinterpret explanations about death.

The goals for staff support are similar. School mental health professionals and qualified consultants may be helpful in providing information and support to staff. They can facilitate discussions about how teachers feel being the bearers of this information, ask about their interactions with students, and offer guidance for any situations with students or parents that they are finding difficult or confusing. Teachers can take important steps to care for themselves personally at these times, which are discussed in depth in Chapter 12.

MAJOR CRISES AND COMPLEX SITUATIONS

Some types of deaths that may touch a school community are especially complicated. They might involve major crises, such as a natural disaster, an industrial accident, a violent incident in the school or community, or an act of aggression or terrorism that directly affects the local community. Providing support to students after such events involves many of the same principles that are described throughout this book, as well as other important steps.

Planning for and responding to such major events is not the focus of this chapter or the book, but it is vitally important for schools. For those interested in learning more about how to develop school crisis preparedness and response plans, as well as how to train school crisis teams, we recommend the handbook developed by members of the NCSCB.¹

School Crisis Plans: Responding to a Death

Schools should have a school crisis team in place that has developed a response plan in the event of a death in the school community.² The plan should cover

how notification of a death is handled, and it should address such matters as who is notified, how people are reached, and what is said. Typically, this includes the following steps:

- *Notify and activate the school crisis team.*
- *Verify the information.* Check with the family, local authorities (e.g., the police or coroner), or other authoritative sources.
- *Determine what information is to be disclosed.* The family may express wishes on this matter. Find out what information has been publicly released through the press or local authorities.
- *Notify teachers and other staff.* An emergency meeting is often scheduled before classes begin. Teachers are informed of the death and given guidelines for notifying students and offering support.
- *Notify students.* Face-to-face notification by familiar staff in small, naturally occurring group settings is recommended. Homeroom or an other class (depending on when the school learns of the death) is often a good option. It is best to avoid delivering such information in large assemblies or over the public address system. Students should all hear the same information (e.g., from a prepared, written statement). They should also be given information about support resources and offered opportunities to talk about their responses to the news. This might occur within a class discussion and by referral to a support room where mental health professionals are available. Options should be made available as soon as students hear the announcement.
- *Notify parents.* Often, this is done by a letter that is sent home with students, e-mailed, or posted on the school's web site. This letter should describe the types of support being offered to students and families.
- *Notify other schools as appropriate.* This might include feeder schools, where the deceased was known by teachers or younger students, or schools attended by siblings of the deceased. In smaller communities, it may be appropriate to notify all schools.

Following these steps gives schools a better opportunity to ensure that students learn of the death in an appropriate setting—that is, with a familiar teacher who has been prepared and is ready to make the announcement. Students can then be connected to support services more easily and effectively.

Making Sure All Students Are Informed

Another important consideration is making sure that all students have been informed about the death. On any given day, some students will not be at school. They may be out sick, away on a field trip for the day, or on a longer class trip to science camp or a music festival. How will students in each of these situations hear the information?

It is difficult for students to come back to a school community that has experienced something this profound when they do not feel included. This can lead to anxiety, misunderstandings, and a sense of isolation.

Although each situation is different, the following are some possible solutions:

- Schools might call or send e-mails to the parents of students who are not in school that day to provide the necessary information, as well as suggestions about talking with their children.
- A school administrator might plan to meet a class returning from a field trip to share the news with them. A call to the teacher's cell phone before they return will allow him or her to make sure students stay together on their return so they can hear the announcement and receive support.

- Teachers at camps or festivals that involve overnight trips could be contacted by the school. Copies of the announcement about the death, as well as supportive material for student discussions, could be e-mailed or faxed to teachers in most settings. It is usually best to share this news with students promptly. Many are likely to be checking in with families and friends and will hear some of the information from them. Students who learn of the news at school will often communicate quickly by text messages or via cell phone. This can leave students in the difficult position of informing others who have not yet heard the news (e.g., friends, classmates, teachers). This is an unfair burden for students.
- During summer vacation or over a holiday period, news of a death may appear in local papers or other news outlets. The school might choose to contact students' families by e-mail or telephone trees to relay the information. In some situations, especially if the death is likely to have a significant impact on many students, the school may decide to open for a day or an evening. Students and families could be invited to come in to talk with counselors if they wish.
- After a summer or holiday period, announcements should be given in all classes so that students who might have missed the information during the break are appropriately informed.

Shared Experiences of Grief

What happens in a school when so many people are sharing an experience of grief? The following are some common occurrences among students:

- *Everything is multiplied.* When one grieving student looks around, he or she sees other grieving students. One person crying might start several other people crying. One anxious student might heighten anxiety in three other students. One act of compassion inspires others. Both positive and negative coping behaviors are likely to be repeated and multiplied many times.
- *Anxiety can grow.* It was previously mentioned that death challenges our *assumptions* about the things that will stay in place in our world (see Chapter 7). We can no longer feel assured that our family members will be waiting for us at home in the evening. When many students in a school are experiencing this effect, anxiety may become higher for all students.
- *Students come with a range of experience and understanding.* Although bereavement is a common experience among children, many students may have never experienced the death of someone they personally know well. They will be having these experiences of grief, anxiety, and confusion for the first time. Other students are likely to have already experienced a death. They will have some basic understandings about grief—they know it is intense, it is confusing, and that it may persist for awhile, but it does not throw you off track forever.
- *Information spreads quickly.* Death is compelling and raises anxiety for almost everyone. People naturally want to know about these events. Staff and students will talk among themselves about what happened. This creates a ripe environment for passing along information as well as for spreading rumors.

This is one reason it is so important to inform the entire school of a death at the same time—it gives all students the same level of knowledge. Otherwise, some students will hear an accurate statement provided by their teachers, and other students will pick up rumors or bits of overheard conversation. When information is inaccurate or incomplete, anxiety and complicated reactions are more likely.

- *Students are confused about what is expected.* Children and teens who have not experienced grief at a group level, or who have never gone through something this serious, may feel uncertain about what to do and how to behave. Particularly among adolescents, who sometimes have an “imaginary audience” in their minds, there may be some rumination about what is expected. “Did I cry enough? Or was that too much?” “Am I supposed to look really serious and sad even if I don’t feel that way?” “Am I supposed to act like I’m actually reading this assignment in class today, when I can’t concentrate on anything?”
- *Some students will naturally be more empathic.* Some students seem to know what to say or do to help themselves, peers, and even teachers feel better. These students can provide positive role modeling and emotional support for their classmates. This is one of the benefits of having students share experiences and ideas about how to deal with grief. They can reach out to one another, offer support, and learn from each other. However, it is important to recognize that a student who appears to be handling the situation well may also benefit from support. These students should not be expected to carry extra burdens as the school community copes with the loss.
- *Teachers can have a range of powerful reactions.* All of these experiences can be compounded by the fact that teachers and other staff are also having powerful reactions. Teachers may have many of the same responses students do—difficulty concentrating, uncertainty about how to act and what to say, confusion, anxiety, and a sense of being overwhelmed by the concentration of grief in the school community.

Often, a few teachers have had a special connection with a student who has died. They may have offered tutoring and mentorship to the student, encouraged extra plans or projects, sponsored the student in competitions, or had other opportunities to build a stronger-than-usual relationship. Some teachers step into roles almost as surrogate parents. They may be personally devastated by the death of a student they admired and cared about.

When an announcement about a death is made schoolwide, teachers may also find themselves experiencing something quite different from their students. If a sixth-grade student dies, for example, the second-grade students may not have known him or her, but their teacher who makes the announcement to the class may have taught this student. Similarly, if a teacher or school administrator dies, students may not have known the person well and may have a mild response to news of the death. Their teacher, however, may be feeling grief related to the loss of a colleague or friend, along with a sense of personal vulnerability (i.e., “Could such a death happen to me?”).

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