

## Helping Students Cope with Tragic Death

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The murder of children and faculty stuns a school community. People feel shock, disbelief, grief, and anger. They want to be helpful to students but often have trouble themselves understanding how such a thing could happen. They may find themselves reminded of losses in their own lives. They often worry about saying too much or too little, about not having enough information, about saying the wrong thing. Though there is no perfect way to respond, there are some guidelines that can often make a positive difference in talking with children.

1. Don't over-assume what the tragedy means to them. They react differently depending on their closeness to the situation, their own personalities, and so on. Some may be intensely upset or deeply moved, others less so. Some may have many questions, others fewer. Not all will be affected intensely or in the same way. Showing little reaction does *not* automatically mean a student is hiding or denying his or her feelings. At the same time, some students who show little emotion at first may react later on. There is no universal timetable.

2. Children are remarkably resilient. They may become quite upset, but given a chance to express what they feel, most usually resume their normal lives—and often do so more rapidly than adults. There is reason to worry about students who show sustained—not temporary—changes in their mood and behavior. In such cases, it is good to consult a school counselor or other professional. But students do not benefit from extensive, probing questioning about their reactions. They do profit from simple, direct information and from faculty and parents being available to respond to their questions and to listen when they themselves want to talk.

3. If you receive difficult questions it can be useful to understand these before answering them. Often a question is spurred by a feeling. Rather than plunging into an answer, it can be helpful to learn what motivates the question by asking, "What made you think of that?" or "Can you tell me what you were thinking about?" Once you know the source of the question, it is easier to answer effectively.

4. There may be questions you cannot answer, which can make you feel inadequate. But most of us are more comforted by straight talk than by false assurances. Rather than invent a response, it can be much more helpful to say, "I don't know," and to ask, "What have you heard?" or, "Did you have an idea about that?" And don't worry if, in responding, you become emotional. It is alright for students to know that adults are moved by terrible losses.

5. Above all, helping young people cope with tragic death is not primarily a matter of technique, not something best handled by a particular set of tactics that deviate sharply from one's familiar patterns of communication. The regular routines of school and of family life, for example, are, all by themselves, a source of comforting continuity and assurance. Adults will rarely go wrong by relying on what is most basic between them and their children—caring and connection. At these times, your presence—your simply being with them, their knowing that you are available—can be very reassuring.

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