Supporting the grieving student and assisting the school after a death by suicide

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Loss is common in the lives of children

- Vast majority of children experience the death of a family member and/or friend by the time they complete high school
- 5% of children experience death of parent by 16
Children may not appear to be grieving

- Adults may communicate death is not discussed
- Children may
  - not yet understand what has happened or its implications
  - be overwhelmed by feelings
  - express grief indirectly through behavior or play
Being with someone in distress

- Do not try to “cheer up” survivors
- Do not encourage to be strong or cover emotions
- Express feelings and demonstrate empathy
- Avoid statements such as: “I know exactly what you are going through” (you can’t), “You must be angry” (don’t tell person how to feel), “Both my parents died when I was your age” (don’t compete for sympathy)
- Allow child/family to be upset and tolerate unpleasant affect, without trying to change it. Accept reactions while suspending judgment — intervene only when safety/health is concern
Children’s guilt

• Thought processes limited by:
  – Egocentrism
  – Limited understanding of causality
  – Magical thinking

• Results in guilt
  – Reassure children of lack of responsibility
Misconceptions & literal misinterpretations

• For young children, thought processes are concrete and literal
• Religious explanations can be shared, but should not be only explanation of death
AFTER A LOVED ONE DIES - HOW CHILDREN GRIEVE AND HOW PARENTS AND OTHER ADULTS CAN SUPPORT THEM.
Adolescent bereavement

• Adults assume that because adolescents have ability to think rationally they need no further explanations
• They assume since adolescents often less amenable to adult guidance, they do not need support
• In reality, adolescents do, but often left unsupported
• Parents often rely on adolescent children to provide comfort and take on adult responsibilities
• Importance of interviewing child alone and need for adult to obtain support so as not to depend on child
Importance of professional self-care

• Recognize it is distressing to be with children who are in distress

• It’s critical staff find ways to have their own personal needs met and appreciate and address impact of supporting children who are grieving or traumatized

• Create a culture where:
  – it is ok to be upset
  – members normalize asking for help and model willingness to accept assistance
  – people see the benefit of supporting children
National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

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• Promote appreciation of role schools can serve to support students, staff, and families at times of crisis and loss

• Enhance training in professional education programs

• Serve as resource for information, training materials, consultation and technical assistance – provided at no charge to schools

• [http://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org](http://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org)
For further information

Toll Free: 877-53-NCSCB (877-536-2722)
http://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org
Coalition to Support Grieving Students

- American Federation of School Administrators (AFSA)
- American Federation of Teachers (AFT)
- American School Counselors Association (ASCA)
- National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)
- National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)
- National Association of School Nurses (NASN)
- National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)
- National Education Association (NEA)
- School Social Workers Association of America (SSWAA)
- School Superintendents Association (AASA)
http://www.grievingstudents.org
Modules Placed into Six Sections

• Each section contains 2-4 video modules; each video is accompanied by handout that summarizes major points
• Conversation and Support
• Developmental and Cultural Considerations
• Practical Considerations
• Reactions and Triggers
• Professional Preparation and Self-Care
• Crisis and Other Special Circumstances
Additional Resources

• Guidance Documents
  – Practical guidelines developed by the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement on how to respond to the death of a student or staff (all causes or suicide)

• Parent booklet: *After a Loved One dies – How Children Grieve and How to Support Them*

• Articles

• Online Resources
  – [http://www.achildingrief.com](http://www.achildingrief.com)
Reluctance of staff to discuss suicide openly with students

- Many members of the school community have personal experiences with suicide
- Persistent, but unfounded, concern that discussion about suicide may prompt others to harm themselves
- Stigma associated with suicide
- Families reluctant to have suicide mentioned as possible cause of their child’s death
Death by suicide shouldn’t be sensationalized

• Students should be guided to remember what made the student special and not focus on way the student died
• Media coverage should be minimized, avoiding front page coverage or details
• Focus on importance of talking to trusted adult if considering harming yourself or suspect someone is potentially suicidal
• Information about suicide hotlines and programs for suicide prevention should be prominent
Additional issues to consider in presentations with students

• Avoid explanations that are vague or simplistic
• Destigmatize seeking help for depression, other mental health problems, substance abuse
• Never agree to keep suicidal intentions secret
• Avoid formal acts to commemorate
Provide additional support to those most at risk of another suicide

• Those closest to deceased
• Individuals who may have neglected or mistreated the individual may feel guilty or be blamed
• Individuals experiencing depression, those who contemplated or attempted suicide, those with family members at risk or who died by suicide
• Communicate with other schools and community agencies to monitor if there is an increase in suicide attempts