

Suggestions for Parents When Discussing Death With Children

Your children may react in a number of ways when hearing of this death. Some may show little or no concern about it; others may react with sadness, questions, confusion, anger, fear, or even silliness. Children who knew the student and children who have experienced their own losses through death, separation, or divorce, may be particularly vulnerable. It is important to answer any questions your children may have, to address their concerns appropriately, and to listen compassionately. You may need to repeatedly reassure them of your presence.

It is often difficult for us to think and talk about death. Be aware of your own feelings. Sometimes issues in our own lives or the losses we have experienced make a discussion about death painful. There is no way to anticipate the intensity or extent of your children's responses to this death. Your calm, caring attitude will be very important to ensure that your child feels secure. The following suggestions may prove helpful to you as you address these difficult and complex issues together:

- Young children may have difficulty accepting that death is permanent. They may expect the deceased to be alive again. You need to explain the death in physical terms: "Her heart stopped beating and no one can make it start up again, even though the doctors tried very hard."
- Discuss death in exact terms, using words such as, "die" or "death." Phrases such as "passed away" and "going to sleep" may be scary and confusing to some children, who think of "passing" from one grade to another or "going to sleep" at bedtime.
- Remind your child that when a young person dies under any circumstances, it is very unusual. Most people live to old age.
- Remind your child that school continues to be a safe place.
- Many children worry or fantasize that their angry thoughts or wishes can cause someone to die. Children need to hear that wishing things or misbehaving cannot cause anyone to become ill or die.
- Sometimes children may substitute feelings they can handle for those they cannot manage. For instance, a youngster may giggle to avoid talking about being sad or afraid or become very angry. These reactions are normal. Be alert, however, to intense behavioral responses your children might exhibit. Children experiencing family stress of any kind, or children who have suffered other losses may be particularly at risk. Please contact the school counselor or your family physician if you have any questions about your child's responses.
- Do not be afraid of tears. Some children may cry if they are particularly upset. On the other hand, do not be concerned if children do not seem sad.
- Give your child the opportunity to share feelings and concerns at his/her own pace. Talk about the death when your child wants to address it, rather than pushing discussion when the child is not ready or interested.

- Consider having your child express sympathy through a note, card, or picture. Your child may also want to express his/her feelings about death in general, or this death, through poetry, art, journals, etc. You may brainstorm words your child can use to describe his/her feelings. Cards sent to the family should be screened for appropriateness before sending them.
- If your child will be attending the funeral, consider attending with him or her, or discuss with your child what is likely to take place, who will be there, and how people are likely to react.