



**Goal:** Disseminate information about forming a Crisis Response Team to address the death of an individual, either a student or teacher, in the school system.

**Disclaimer:** Our Crisis Response Team has not had the experience of responding to a large-scale crisis.

- PREPaRE model (Prevent, Reaffirm, Evaluate, Provide and Respond, Examine).
- Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for School Crisis Response Mutual Aid that would be agreed upon by the County Office of Education, County Office of Emergency Services, County Mental Health Services and those schools within the county.



## Crisis Response Team

- School Psychologists
- Therapy Dogs
- Outside Mental Health Agencies
- Pastoral Groups





## School Psychologists

Program Training: Crisis Counseling and Mental Health

Additional Trainings: PREPaRE  
Trauma Informed Educator Training  
Youth Mental Health First Aid  
Crisis Prevention and Intervention  
Building Resilient Learners  
ALICE



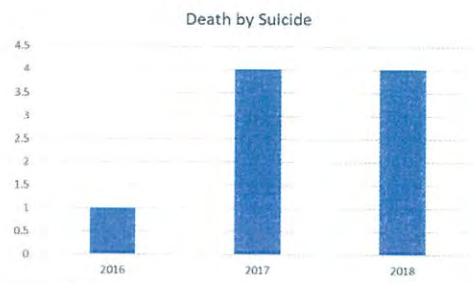
## Therapy Dogs and Their Handlers





## Crisis Response to a school-related death in past three years

- 20 Individual situations of Student death (illness, accident or suicide)
- 3 Situations of a Teacher death (illness or suicide)





## Procedures When We Receive Notification of a School-Related Death

1. MVESC Superintendent is alerted of death
2. MVESC Superintendent contacts the School District Superintendent to inform of and/or confirm the tragedy and offer services
3. MVESC Superintendent contacts the Department Chair of the School Psychologist and our trained Dog Therapy Handler
4. Department Chair notifies School Psychologists on Crisis Team
5. Lead School Psychologist coordinates schedules
6. Dedicated School Psychologists obtains the Crisis Response Bag



## Crisis Response Bag

- ❖ Information Binder
- ❖ Boxes of Tissues
- ❖ Hand Sanitizer
- ❖ White Paper
- ❖ Construction Paper
- ❖ Crayons
- ❖ Markers
- ❖ Big Envelope
- ❖ Mints
- ❖ Bottles of Water-available



## On-Site Procedures

1. Get the facts
2. Find out if the family wants the name and details released
3. Find out about siblings, relatives & close friends
4. Determine how staff will be informed
5. Determine how students will be informed
  - Classroom by classroom vs. General Announcement
6. Establish place for students to go for assistance
7. Assign staff for crowd control (hallways)
8. Designate two staff to collect student's possessions
9. Be sure the student's name is immediately removed from the Absence Call
10. Inform staff - official facts
11. Inform students



## Student Assistance

The students are directed to a common area and then directed to an individual Crisis Team Member

### Triage

- Those who knew the student really well
  - Those who were an acquaintance
  - Those who have experienced a personal loss not related
  - Those who just want to be a part of the attention
- 
- Evaluation of students who are in need of even more assistance



## Time to Come Together

(depends on the situation)

Establish a common area that is monitored

- Can make cards
- Sign a banner
- Sit with the therapy dogs
- Sit with each other
- Share good things about the person



Sharon McDermott: Superintendent of Franklin Local Schools



Crisis Response Team experience





## Lessons Learned:

- Best Laid Plans...
- Have a plan for follow-up with At-Risk students
- Sometimes it is the STAFF that needs support
- Write down names and relationship to deceased
- Read cards and banners before sending to family
- Can't name the playground for a deceased student
- Memorializing Suicide - School Policy
- Can't control the community's response
- Guilt vs. Grief
- Never a 'good' time for a crisis



## REFERENCES

- Handouts for Staff
- Handouts for Students
- Examples of Announcements to Parent
- Examples of Press Release

### FREE materials:

- Coalition to Support Grieving Students  
<http://newyorklifestore.com/nyl2>
- Crisis Text Line in Ohio Text "4HOPE" to 741 741





# QUESTIONS



*These guidelines are designed to help school administrators, teachers, and crisis team members respond to the needs of students and staff after a loss has impacted the school environment, such as after the death of a student or staff member or when deaths occur that affect many people in the community. These guidelines are not intended to provide guidance on clinical care or bereavement counseling and are not intended to address personal losses that impact only one or a few members of the school community.*

#### **BEREAVEMENT IS COMMON AMONG SCHOOL CHILDREN**

For school personnel, this means that it is highly likely you will encounter a grieving student almost every day, even if you do not see any outward or visible signs of grief. In some communities, violent deaths may be sadly common – although students in these high-risk communities may appear to be “used to loss,” they are likely to have more difficulty adjusting to multiple losses.

Well informed teachers and school personnel can be a source of support for students, but unintentionally they may, if not well informed, be a source of stress. For example, not understanding reactions may lead to misinterpretation of behavioral reactions to loss as misbehavior and disrespect for others.

How long it may take for students to adjust to the loss will vary, but most children are not “over a loss” in six months or a year. As such, appropriate services should be planned for the immediate aftermath, the months following the loss, and for the long-term.

#### **SCHOOL CRISIS TEAM INTERVENTIONS:**

##### **Responding to a Student or Staff Death in a School Setting**

When a death occurs, activate the school’s crisis team and plan to address the loss. Coordinate efforts with other schools that may also be impacted.

1. First, it is extremely important to verify the information (e.g., from family members or local authorities).
2. Next, determine what information the family would like to have disclosed (or what information has already been released publicly from a reliable source).
3. Once the death has been verified, notify the school staff and students.
4. Notify someone to have the student removed from the One Call System.

5. Make sure teachers don’t mark the student as “absent” so the parent doesn’t get a call.
6. Notify the student’s bus driver.
7. Obtain the student’s belongings.
8. Document who came to see grief counselors and school psychologists.
9. Refer to district policies for memorials.

By the time children complete high school, most will experience the death of a family member or friend, with 5% of children experiencing the death of a parent by 16 years of age.

Nearly 40% will experience a death of a peer  
20% will have witnessed a death

Schools can be the best setting to provide services to students (and staff) after a loss that affects the school community:

1. Schools provide a familiar environment
2. Large numbers of students can be served
3. Many children will benefit from supportive services that can be readily provided in a school setting
4. Students coping after the loss can be monitored over time and referrals for clinical services can be facilitated as needed
5. Parents may be more willing to accept services provided in school settings, where the stigma associated with mental health services may be decreased





**NOTIFICATION**

- 1. Notify the School Crisis Team and Develop a Plan:**  
Consider activating the school crisis team. If initial notification occurs outside of school hours, this may require initiating the phone tree to notify the school staff and to invite them to meet before school to organize a unified plan and to brief school staff. If notification occurs during school hours, this may require the distribution of a written statement or a staff meeting.
- 2. Notify Teachers and Staff First:**  
Meet before school with school teachers and staff to discuss what is known about the death. This gives teachers an opportunity to ask any questions they wish and to prepare themselves before they see their students in class. If a teacher does not feel able to talk to his/her students about the death, a member of the crisis team should be available to step in or assist with the notification.
- 3. Notify Students Face-to-Face with Familiar Staff:**  
If a teacher has died, consider having a teacher from the same or a lower grade who is familiar with the deceased teacher's students, or a teacher from the school crisis team who is more comfortable, notify that class. Consider having this teacher remain with the class over the next couple days and have a substitute cover for the less directly impacted class.
- 4. Prepare a Statement for Students:**  
Adults often struggle with what to say. With a prepared statement, teachers can give the same information to all students simultaneously. This should be done in small, naturally occurring groups such as homeroom or first period classes; every effort should be made to ensure that all students are present at the time this information is shared. Include information about the availability of mental health and support services and how students may access those services. Avoid use of public address systems or large assemblies to make such announcements.
- 5. Prepare a Statement for Parents:**  
Draft a letter to be sent home with students for parents to notify them about the death and what services are being offered to students and families. Assure parents that crisis teams have been mobilized and support services are available. (Template letters, that schools can have in advance of a crisis so that notification statements can be quickly and easily prepared, are available at the [National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement](http://National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement).)

**CRISIS AND GRIEF COUNSELING AND OTHER SUPPORT SERVICES AT SCHOOL**

- 1. Help Students with Coping Behaviors to Support and Maintain their Attendance and Classroom Learning:**  
Following a loss, addressing the event with students directly may decrease the negative impact on school attendance and learning. This can be done individually and in group settings. Students may express many different emotions and feelings. The goal is to allow this expression in a safe and non-judgmental environment.
- 2. Help Students Deal with Difficult Feelings:**  
Students may also have feelings of regret, particularly if they believe they had mistreated the individual in the past. Adolescents may be particularly vulnerable as a group with an increased risk of feeling depressed or anxious and engaging in self-blame or guilt related to the loss. If the death was a suicide (see Special Circumstances below), these feelings may be heightened.
- 3. Help Younger Students:**  
Younger students may have more difficulty understanding death and are more likely to have literal misinterpretations in response to explanations (e.g., if told the deceased is in everlasting sleep, they may become fearful at bedtime). All students (and staff) are likely to experience some guilt feelings after a death, even if there is no logical reason.







**CRISIS AND GRIEF COUNSELING AND OTHER SUPPORT SERVICES AT SCHOOL (Cont'd)**

**4. Establish Crisis Counseling or Grief Counseling Support Rooms and Protocols:**

1. Establish procedures for leaving class (e.g., Will a pass be required? Should a student who is very distressed be escorted to the support room?) and for returning to class before the end of the period. If a student remains in the support room at the end of the period, be sure notice is provided to the classroom teacher for that period as well as the next one. Such actions ensure that the school has accurate knowledge about student whereabouts. In the immediate aftermath of a death, limit off-grounds privileges if indicated and establish procedures to clear students prior to leaving school grounds during the school day.
2. More extensive services will be needed in the immediate aftermath of a school-wide crisis. Consider having support and counseling services available to students and school personnel before, during and after school hours in the immediate aftermath.
3. Plan for ongoing and long-term services to be available to students. If the death was due to a school crisis, plans should be made for commemoration and memorialization, especially at the time of the anniversary of the death(s) (Further guidelines on memorialization and commemoration). Additional services should also be planned for dates and events may serve as triggers for grief of students or staff, such as graduation, the prom, athletic events (if the deceased was an athlete) etc.
4. Have substitute teachers available that can rotate among classes to allow teachers to seek supportive services in teacher/staff support rooms during school hours.
5. If the death(s) are associated with a crisis that has impacted the community, consider some support services for parents at school in the immediate aftermath.
6. School counselors, school nurses, school psychologists and school social workers can help teachers identify risk factors and signs of distress that may indicate the need for mental health services above what is offered at school. As with any counseling services, parents should be notified if additional services are recommended.
7. Especially after traumatic losses (e.g., suicide or homicide), be proactive and set the tone for students to seek out counselors if they have troubling thoughts. Encourage students to identify friends they may be concerned about. These include students who have suicidal thoughts or have made threatening statements.



**CRISIS AND GRIEF COUNSELING AND OTHER SUPPORT SERVICES AT SCHOOL (Cont'd)**

**5. Guidelines for Identifying Students Who May be at Higher Risk for Emotional Distress:**

1. Students who were close friends of the deceased
2. Students who shared a class with the deceased. Have a member of the crisis team follow the student's schedule to help determine classmates that may benefit from extra attention.
3. Students who shared extracurricular activities with the deceased
4. Students who shared a similar characteristic with the deceased. This will depend on the circumstances of the death (e.g., chronic illness – other students with chronic illness; suicide after bullying – students who may be bullied or who had pre-existing depression; car accident – students that have recently received their driving licenses; or pedestrian accident – students who walk to school).
5. Students with a troubled or strained relationship with the deceased
6. Students from other schools if the deceased recently transferred or has siblings at another school
7. Students with a history of prior or concurrent losses and/or emotional difficulties.

**6. Funerals, Memorial Services and Spontaneous Memorials**

**1. Participation of Students:**

Students may wish to attend the memorial services and/or funeral of the deceased student or teacher. Talk to the family of the deceased and determine their wishes. If many students or staff are likely to attend, inquire if there may be visitation hours/memorial service outside of school hours. If the services are during school hours, establish a policy for student absence that allows students who have a close relationship to the deceased to attend. Have substitute teachers available for teachers who wish to attend the services. Consider arranging for crisis counseling staff to attend after-hours services that are likely to be attended by large numbers of students.

**2. Spontaneous Memorials:**

Informal memorials are likely to “spring up” after the death of a student or teacher. Plans to handle the flowers, cards, etc. should be made in advance. Determine the time period that the memorial will remain (one week, two weeks, a month?), and communicate what will be done with the non-perishable items after that time and indicate what will be done with the non-perishable items (e.g., stuffed animals will be sent to the children's ward of local hospitals, etc.). Providing alternate commemorative opportunities for the students and engaging students early on in the response efforts or an announcement about the family's wishes may help to minimize these spontaneous memorials.





**CRISIS AND GRIEF COUNSELING AND OTHER SUPPORT SERVICES AT SCHOOL (Cont'd)**

6. **Funerals, Memorial Services and Spontaneous Memorials (Cont'd)**
3. **Timing of Memorial Activities at School:**  
Commemorative activities and memorialization efforts should not be a focus of the crisis response in the immediate aftermath of a death. If done too soon, there may be a perception that the school is trying to “close the chapter” on grieving.
4. **Equitable Policies:**  
In general, schools should avoid formal commemorative or memorialization activities or acts (e.g., naming a building or hanging a plaque) to mark the death of a popular student or staff member since failure to respond in the future in a similar manner to the death of a less popular student/staff may raise equity concerns; schools may be reluctant to provide similar responses after certain deaths (e.g., suicide, drug overdose) in order to minimize glamorization of the cause of death (see Special Circumstances below). Instead, less formal but thoughtful commemorative activities developed over time with active student involvement is often much more meaningful (and therapeutic) to students and staff. Such commemoration is more likely to recognize and preserve essential memories of the deceased than are more routine and reactive efforts instituted shortly after notification. (Further information about developing appropriate commemorative and memorialization activities in schools)
5. **Constructive Expression of Grief:**  
Students may wish to write letters/draw pictures to send to the deceased student’s or staff member’s family. Be sure these are reviewed before sending them out. Also, be careful not to interpret the drawings and writings without adequate input from mental health professionals. Avoid activities that solicit public anonymous statements, such as posting places for students to express their thoughts anonymously about the deceased, as school teachers and staff will not be able to identify students who may express worrisome thoughts (e.g., suicidal ideation or threatening statements).
6. **Handling Traumatic Reminders for Students:**  
School desks and lockers may serve as unwelcome reminders of the deceased student(s). Consider procedures for handling these, drawing on the input of the classmates.
7. **Personal Effects of the Deceased:**  
Arrange with parents/family members for the return of belongings that is at a time convenient for them, preferable after school hours. Have the personal effects available at the office so that parents/families are not presented with the emotional challenge of having to clean out a locker or desk. Have a member of the crisis team or a school counselor present when parents come to retrieve a child’s belongings.
8. **Notify yearbook advisor - include in the yearbook appropriately.**





### IMPACT ON LEARNING

Reactions after a loss can have a significant impact on learning. Students may

1. Show a decline in school performance
2. Have difficulty mastering new material
3. Become more irritable
4. Become more withdrawn
5. Become more anxious or depressed
6. Become more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors such as substance abuse, promiscuity, reckless driving, and suicide attempts in adolescents
7. Become focused on the loss

Students should be offered additional supports, such as tutoring or participation in mentoring programs to assist them in maintaining their academic progress before academic failure occurs, which would represent an additional stressor.

### What Teachers Can Do:

1. Listen – to what students want to share with you. It may be difficult but just listening can be a powerful healing force.
2. Protect – students from becoming re-traumatized. Sometimes other students may ridicule or bully students who are highly emotional or cry.
3. Connect – with students who have suffered a loss by asking how they are doing; checking in with them on a regular basis; letting them know that you are available to listen; or giving them positive feedback about their attendance or classroom work.
4. Model – adult behavior that shows them how responsible adults react to loss and respond to a crisis. Adults may grieve, but they continue to act with consideration and maintain calm routines at school.
5. Teach – Crisis counselors can teach students about the normal signs and symptoms of grief and/or trauma so that students can assess and understand their own behavior and learn new ways of coping.



**COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH**

**1. The Role of the PIO:**

Media attention is likely after a death of a student or school staff. This is best handled by the Public Information Officer (PIO) of the district or the principal at the school site. Teachers, staff, and parents should be made aware that all media requests should be referred to this individual.

**2. Protect Students from Being Re-Traumatized:**

The focus of all communications, including media coverage, should be on the protection of students and the school environment from unwanted intrusive attention. Television coverage of the event should not be watched in the classroom during school hours. Information about how to handle media requests can be distributed to parents.

**3. Ongoing communication between parents and school teachers and staff about how students are doing** will be more important to ensure appropriate support and intervention services in the immediate aftermath of a death and in the long-term. Parents of children identified as at-risk for mental health difficulties should be given information about whom to contact with concerns and about positive progress. School personnel should also keep parents informed about their children's functioning at school (e.g., school work, peer relationships, and behaviors). Again, parents should be provided with information related to common reactions after a death as well as behaviors that may signal the need for more intensive mental health services.

**4. The formal establishment of communications and liaison with community resources is an important relationship to develop** prior to any type of crisis. Developing a relationship and crisis plan role with community-based mental health professionals in advance of the need will allow the school to quickly and effectively activate these resources in times of need. They can provide mental health services at the school as well as be available for students and staff who may need more intensive services. Furthermore, mental health experts can assist schools in:

1. Crisis team development
2. Crisis preparedness planning and exercises
3. In-service trainings around school crisis and bereavement
4. Consultation on issues of child development, crisis and bereavement

**SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES**

1. **Suicide of a Student:** The suicide of a student creates unique issues for school personnel.
  1. Clarify with family about information they wish to disclose about the cause of death, but be aware if information has already been shared publicly by a reliable source.
  2. Identify students considered at greatest risk for mental health distress. (Use the same ideas as listed above, especially any students who may have known of the plan or students who may become "scapegoats" after the death.)
  3. Educate students, staff, and parents about warning signs and symptoms of suicide and distribute broadly information about hotlines and support services.
  4. Encourage students to seek help; de-stigmatize and legitimize the importance of mental health services and communication with others who can help.
  5. While being sure to acknowledge the individual who died, avoid romanticizing or glamorizing suicide.
  6. Minimize media coverage of the suicide.
  7. Be aware of any suicides in the larger community by maintaining good communication with other area schools, community mental health providers/agencies, and the police.
2. **Other Situations When the Family May Not Wish to Disclose the Cause of Death** (e.g., drunk driving or other alcohol-related death, overdose, related to self-inflicted or intentional asphyxiation): As with any death of a student, initiate the school crisis plan and support services. Like suicide, the death may present a "window of opportunity" to educate students, staff, and parents about life-threatening behaviors and their consequences. Many of the issues to consider with suicide with also apply to these circumstances.
3. **Circumstances in Which School Liability May be at Issue:** Although the circumstances of the death do not have to be discussed, the death itself will need to be addressed and support services provided to staff and students. Sending letters to parents alerting them of the death as well as available services remains important.
4. **Death of Student or School Personnel When School is Not in Session:** If a death occurs that is likely to impact broadly the school community when school is not in session, such as over the summer or other vacation, involve the school crisis team in developing a plan including how to contact students and staff such as via telephone trees and mailings. School administrators may wish to offer the school building as a place for support services to be offered in the immediate aftermath of the event and may choose to communicate this through public media. When school resumes after the holiday or vacation, additional plans should be in place for notification of those students and staff not previously contacted. Have crisis team members and supportive services available once this information is shared with students and staff.





## CRISIS RESPONSE DOCUMENT FACT SHEET: ABBREVIATED FORM

### TRAUMATIC EVENT CRISIS INTERVENTION PLAN

#### Abbreviated Interview Format

Name of Informant \_\_\_\_\_ Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

Person Completing Form: \_\_\_\_\_ Date/Time of Call: \_\_\_\_\_

#### FACTS ABOUT THE SITUATION

Name of Victim: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

School: \_\_\_\_\_ Neighborhood: \_\_\_\_\_

What was the cause of death/injury/illness: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What happened (description of incident/situation)? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Was anyone else involved (if so, how were they effected)? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**CRISIS RESPONSE DOCUMENT  
FACT SHEET: ABBREVIATED FORM**

Informant Interview  
Page 2

**RELEVANT INFORMATION ABOUT THE VICTIM**

How long has \_\_\_\_\_ been enrolled/employed in our school district: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Do any other family members attend/work at other schools, if so where? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Is there anything else we should know about the family? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Are there any particular person(s) that we should look out for? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

In case of death, who will receive the personal belongings of the deceased? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**FUNERAL OR MEMORIAL ARRANGEMENTS OR REQUESTS (IF KNOWN):**

What is the name and location of the funeral home? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Visitation times and dates? \_\_\_\_\_

Funeral time and date? \_\_\_\_\_

Does the family have any special requests regarding visitation, donations and memorials? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**COMMENTS:**



## CRISIS RESPONSE DOCUMENT

### 10 COMMON MYTHS ABOUT CHILDREN AND GRIEF

#### 10 Common Myths about Children and Grief

Source: Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D

- Myth # 1:** Grief and mourning are the same experiences.  
Grief is the internal response to loss. To heal, we must grieve and mourn. Mourning is grief gone public. Kids will express this through behaviors, not verbally.
- Myth # 2:** A child's grief and mourning is short in duration.  
Mourning is a process, not an event. It affects kids differently by age at the time of a death.
- Myth # 3:** There is a predictable and orderly "stage-like" progression to the experiences of grief and mourning. We need to "walk beside" bereaved people, not in front of them trying to get them to the next stage or expecting them to behave in only a certain fashion.
- Myth #4:** Infants and toddlers are too young to mourn.  
Anyone old enough to love is old enough to mourn and feel pain at a loss. Attachment problems can occur in the first days of life.
- Myth #5:** Children are not affected by the grief and mourning of the adults who surround them.  
Children "read" emotions long before they can talk. When children hurt, we want to deny their pain or protect them.
- Myth #6:** The pain of childhood bereavement always leads to later problems.  
Since 1930s, researchers have tried to link grief with later mental illness but have not done so. A person may be at risk for emotional problems but not "destined" to difficulty.
- Myth # 7:** Children are better off if they don't attend funerals.  
When a significant event happens in the life of a family, every member should be respected enough to be included in rituals (like the funeral service) to help them deal with the death.
- Myth # 8:** Children who express tears are being "weak" and harming themselves in the long run.  
Don't say, "be a man", "be strong" or teach shame with crying. Tears lessen over time but they are an intelligent response to grief and mourning.
- Myth # 9:** Adults should instantly teach children about religion and death.  
Kids are concrete learners; they do not understand symbolism, which is a big part of religious belief and teaching.
- Myth # 10:** The goal of helping bereaved children is to "get them over" or resolve their grief.  
People are not the same after the death of a person to whom they were strongly attached. Reconciliation or "living with the loss" happens. Three of the most sympathetic and truthful words you can say to children are "I don't know."





## CRISIS RESPONSE DOCUMENT TALKING POINTS FOLLOWING A CRISIS

### TALKING POINTS FOR ADDRESSING STUDENT QUESTIONS FOLLOWING A CRISIS

Using age-specific terms, explain to children the events that have transpired. You may also want to write it on the board.

**Example:**

*We are sad to announce that something very unfortunate has happened to someone we care about. On (time, date and name) was involved in a \_\_\_\_\_ (Release as much information as possible without graphic details or nonfactual elaboration).*

*Some of you may feel sadness over this loss. If you feel you need to talk with someone about these feelings, counselors are available in \_\_\_ to help. Information about funeral arrangements will be given as soon as they become available.*

- Tell students how and where they can obtain information and assistance (point out safe rooms and the names of counselors).
- Identify people and phone numbers students and parents can call if they need assistance—provide a list or have students write down names and numbers (Consider using a student response form to reach out to less expressive students who may be unable to ask for help).
- Tell students it is okay to feel afraid, confused, angry and guilty. These are all normal responses to a very abnormal crisis or tragedy.
- Ask if students have questions. Remember to listen carefully and be honest.
- Provide exact, factual information.
- Answer only what students ask you.
- Admit when you don't have specific answers.
- Use realistic terms with students when discussing aspects of an accident, injury and loss.
- Avoid euphemisms.

**Emphasize**

- Each student is valued and will be supported in this time of strife.
- School is safe and central to the community.
- No one is to blame and varied reactions are okay.
- If the occurrence is a suicide, communicate that the deceased is not a bad person and that he or she chose a permanent action to address temporary problems.
- All students and staff should cooperate with investigators or evacuation procedures.
- Encourage students to be aware of each other and to walk those in need to an adult for help.
- Communicate that there will be an organized way to say goodbye to the deceased, such as a journal, memorial video and/or art project.



**SAMPLE: Announcement about a student who died by suicide  
– after two other deaths in the same school**

It is with great sadness that we must announce the death of another Mid East student. Although this is the third time we've had to make this announcement this school year, it is no easier than the first. We value ALL lives.

As many of you probably already know, Student died by Friday evening. Student was a junior in our Computer Science program. We will pause with a moment of silence to remember Student, his family, friends and all who are affected by his death.

Grief counselors will be available today if you need to talk to someone. Teachers will excuse you from class to come to the office. We will also have a banner hanging in the cafeteria for all to sign and then it will be presented to his parents.

The administration, counselors, teachers and staff want to take this time to remind all students that we are available on a day-to-day basis if you feel you are ever in need of talking to someone. We also have other resources when you are not in school, such as texting '4hope' to 741 741 or calling a crisis line and speaking to someone anonymously. This information will be posted in the cafeteria.

Everyone experiences tough times in their lives and we want you to know that there are people and resources to help you get through them.

## CRISIS RESPONSE DOCUMENT GUIDELINES FOR AFTER A SUICIDE

### IN THE AFTERMATH OF SUICIDE: THE SCHOOL Guidelines

1. **KEEP THE SCHOOL OPEN**  
The school is a magnet in times of crisis. Collaborate with Cluster crisis team. Establish bell schedules, crisis centers and provide services to students, staff, parents and witnesses.
2. **CONSULT DISTRICT CRISIS CHECKLIST**
3. **CONTACT FAMILY**  
Contact and support from the school is greatly appreciated.
4. **PROVIDE FACT SHEETS**  
The death and the fact that it was a suicide should be acknowledged. Do not give details of method. Keep parents informed as to warning signs, activities, services and support available at school. Consult with police (school, local law enforcement) as appropriate. Faculty fact sheet should include information on bell schedule, debriefing meetings, and crisis center locations.
5. **DETERMINE INTERVENTION GROUPS**  
Groups might include the deceased student's classes, friends, siblings (and their schools), teachers/staff; parents; and community. Direct at-risk youth/adults to crisis centers for triage. Provide mental health debriefing for traumatized individuals as appropriate. Relieve impacted staff. Provide daily staff and crisis team informational debriefing.
6. **GRIEF COUNSELING**  
Students should be given every opportunity to express their grief in whatever setting is most comfortable: individual or small groups (in the crisis room); in classroom discussions with their teacher and crisis facilitator(s). Provide for ventilation of feelings and validate all expressions of grief. No large group assemblies. Provide referrals of community agencies and other available services. Follow District procedures for referral of suicidal students.
7. **MEDIA**  
Establish media control. Select spokesperson. Consult with Office of Communications. Emphasize intervention and prevention efforts.
8. **NO MEMORIALS/DEDICATIONS/PLAQUES**  
Appropriate activities include donations to the family, charity or suicide prevention efforts; establish support programs at school.



## CRISIS RESPONSE DOCUMENT GUIDELINES FOR AFTER A SUICIDE

9. EMPHASIZE NO ONE/THING IS BLAME  
Suicide is very complex and cannot be simplified by blaming individuals, drugs, music, the school.
10. CONTACT: THE RANGE OF PHYSICAL, MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL CHANGES FOLLOWING A CRISIS OR DISASTER

Individuals may experience a wide range of post traumatic stress disorder reactions. Some of these reactions are listed below:

### PHYSICAL CHANGES:

Pupils Dilate  
Saliva Thickens  
Heart Rate Increases  
Stomach Mobility is Inhibited  
Blood Flow Changes  
Cholesterol Levels Increase

### MENTAL CHANGES:

Difficulty with Memory  
Decreased Computation Skills  
Decreased Ability to Analyze  
Slowed Learning Speed  
Impaired Decision Making Skills  
Decreased Self Awareness

### EMOTIONAL CHANGES:

Feeling of Isolation  
Developmental Regression  
Depression  
Lack of Enthusiasm (Anhedonia)\*  
Denial  
Anger  
Bitterness  
Decrease Intimacy  
Lack of Trust  
Return to Past Hurts and Traumas  
Guilt

\* The inability to feel pleasure or happiness for experiences that are ordinarily pleasurable.

## CRISIS RESPONSE DOCUMENT SAMPLE NOTES TO PARENTS:

### POSSIBLE WRITTEN NOTICES TO PARENTS

TO: Parents of students who attend \_\_\_\_\_

FROM: \_\_\_\_\_, Principal

RE: Unfortunate incident

Today we had (or were made aware of) an unfortunate incident. Although our students and staff handled the situation well, I want to tell you about it so you will know the facts and so you will be better able to talk about it with your child.

*Briefly describe the facts of the situation. It may help to keep to who, what, why, when, where, etc. Include the current status of the situation, i.e., hospitalized, funeral arrangements (or directions to read the newspaper, listen to the radio, watch for additional information that will be sent home with each child, etc.)*

We had a team of people (counselors) in our school today to help our students. These people (counselors) were available for students to talk with about their concerns regarding the incidents.

Your child may express concern to you about what happened. The concern may be shared today, next week, or even later. The best way you can help is to listen and be reassuring. If there is a way we can be of assistance to your child, please call the office.

Thank you for your support at this difficult time

-----  
Date:

Dear Parents:

The school is deeply saddened by the death of \_\_\_\_\_, one of our fourth grade teachers. \_\_\_\_\_ had been a member of our faculty for seven years. We will miss her. She was found in her home over the weekend. We have no additional information to give you about the shocking event of her death at this time.

Your child's class had the opportunity to talk to a school psychologist (counselor) from the crisis team today about our loss. You may expect your child to want to talk to you about his or her feelings when they get home from school. As difficult as it is, talking about feelings will help them deal with the death.

The funeral will be on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_ at the \_\_\_\_\_. \_\_\_\_\_ Funeral home is in charge of the service. We encourage you to accompany and support your child if you want him or her to attend the service. The school office needs a written note from you in order for us to release your child from class.

Please telephone the school counselor or school psychologist if you would like further help or assistance.

Sincerely,

Principal



## CRISIS RESPONSE DOCUMENT SAMPLE NOTES TO PARENTS:

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Date:

Dear Parents of \_\_\_\_\_ Students;

The \_\_\_\_\_ School community was saddened to learn of the reported suicide of one of our students. The death of any young person is a loss, which, in one way or another, affects each of us. The tragic circumstances of \_\_\_\_\_'s death are perhaps more shocking and more difficult to accept.

We have asked the assistance of the crisis team to help our school community deal with this loss. We are doing everything we can to help your child and our staff through this tragic experience. You may anticipate more questions and a need to talk about the suicide at home. \_\_\_\_\_'s funeral will be held at \_\_\_\_\_, on \_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_. Your child may be excused from school to attend the funeral with written permission from you. We encourage you to make arrangements to accompany him or her. You will need to provide your own transportation. The school will remain open for those students who choose not to attend the funeral.

John's classmates and teachers have decided to receive donations in his memory and will make a contribution to the \_\_\_\_\_. Please contact the school office at \_\_\_\_\_ for further information. If you have any concerns, regarding your child's reactions to this loss, \_\_\_ and \_\_\_ will be available to assist you.

Sincerely,

Principal

## Sample Letter to Parents

Date

Dear Parent,

It is with deep regret that we inform you about a recent loss to our school community. On (INSERT date), (INSERT name of the deceased) <sup>1</sup> (INSERT brief facts about the death)<sup>2</sup>. This loss is sure to raise many emotions, concerns, and questions for our entire school, especially our students.

Our school (and INSERT name of school district, if applicable) has a Crisis Intervention Team made up of professionals trained to help with the needs of students, parents, and school personnel at difficult times such as this. At our school (or INSERT name of alternative school), we have counselors available for any student who may need or want help or any type of assistance surrounding this loss. We encourage you, as parents, to also feel free to use our resources.

We have enclosed some information that may be useful to you in helping your child at home. If you would like additional information or need assistance, please do not hesitate to contact (INSERT name of Communications Coordinator or Counseling Services Coordinator) at (INSERT phone number).

We are saddened by the loss to our school community and will make every effort to help you and your child as you need.

Sincerely,

(Type the name of the signer and title. This letter is usually signed by the principal, superintendent, or crisis team coordinator)

Examples of information to insert in the opening paragraph:

<sup>1</sup>John Smith, one of our 9<sup>th</sup> grade students  
Mrs. Jones, who taught 7<sup>th</sup> grade English

<sup>2</sup>was killed in an automobile accident  
died after a long-illness  
died suddenly  
died by suicide (*before inserting this information, be sure the immediate family is fine with this information being released*)





NATIONAL  
ASSOCIATION OF  
SCHOOL  
PSYCHOLOGISTS

## MEMORIAL ACTIVITIES AT SCHOOL: A LIST OF "DO'S" AND "DON'TS"

*Memorial activities can be a valuable way for schools to help students and staff deal with trauma and loss. How a school approaches a memorial can make the difference in the healing nature of the process. Following are a few Do's and Don'ts to avoid further traumatizing students and promote a positive experience. For more information on memorials and helping children cope, go to [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)*

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### **Do**

*Do* prepare for the needs of youth both preceding and following memorial activities in the community or school.

*Do* keep parents and staff informed of all upcoming activities related to the memorial plan, and allow any student, with parental permission, to attend a memorial activity.

*Do* provide staff and parents with information regarding possible related behaviors and emotions that students may display.

*Do* focus on the needs and goals related to the students, and include parents and community members in activities as appropriate.

*Do* be sensitive to developmental and cultural differences when developing memorials.

*Do* develop living memorials (e.g., tolerance programs) that address the problems that lead to the crisis event.

*Do* something to prevent other crises from happening. Try to move students from the role of "victims" to the role of "doers."

*Do* emphasize signs of recovery and hope in any memorial activity.

*Do* allow students to discuss, in small group settings, such as classrooms, how they feel about their memorial experiences.

*Do* encourage communication (e.g., writing letters and exchange of ideas) related to memorial activities.

*Do* provide a referral system (school and community based) to identify youth who display complicated grief reactions and ensure appropriate support services are available.

*Do* establish an infrastructure (plans and processes) to provide assistance and support to students in immediate need.

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### **DON'T**

*Don't* underestimate the resurfacing of intense common grief reactions, including sadness and anger.

*Don't* require all students or staff to attend a memorial activity.

*Don't* pathologize normal grief reactions. Conversely, do not minimize serious, atypical grief reactions that may require closer clinical investigation.

*Don't* try to accomplish all things in the school context; there are multiple forums to which the school staff, administration, and faculty may contribute that do not occur at school.

*Don't* assume that "one size fits all" when it comes to developing a memorial.

*Don't* allow the memorial to be a forum for expressions of hatred and anger toward the perpetrators of crises.

*Don't* focus the memorial on the uncontrollable aspects of the crisis.

*Don't* allow a memorial to simply recount tales of the traumatic stressor.

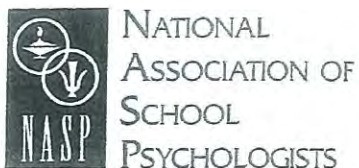
*Don't* schedule a memorial at such a time that it will not allow students to discuss or process their experiences.

*Don't* force students to participate or share feelings and ideas.

*Don't* expect that staff and faculty will be able to independently identify individuals in need of mental health assistance.

*Don't* anticipate that students will independently seek out the appropriate professional assistance.





# Helping Children Cope With Loss, Death, and Grief

## Tips for Teachers and Parents

Everyone is impacted when a death or tragedy occurs within a school community. The effects can be significant whether it is the loss of a student, parent or staff member. Even highly traumatic or violent deaths of less close individuals, like those we have witnessed in recent years, can have a strong impact. How school personnel handle the crisis can help shape the immediate and longer-term grieving process for students, staff, and families. Children, in particular, need the love and support of their teachers and parents in order to cope with their loss and reach constructive grief resolution.

### Expressions of Grief

Talking to children about death must be geared to their developmental level and their capacity to understand the related facts of the situation. Children will be aware of the reactions of significant adults as they interpret and react to information about death and tragedy. The range of reactions that children display in response to the death of significant others may include:

- **Emotional shock** and at times an apparent lack of feelings, which serve to help the child detach from the pain of the moment;
- **Regressive (immature) behaviors**, such as needing to be rocked or held, difficulty separating from parents or significant others, needing to sleep in parent's bed or an apparent difficulty completing tasks well within the child's ability level;
- **Explosive emotions and acting out behavior** that reflect the child's internal feelings of anger, terror, frustration and helplessness. Acting out may reflect insecurity and a way to seek control over a situation for which they have little or no control;
- **Asking the same questions over and over**, not because they do not understand the facts, but rather because the information is so hard to believe or accept. Repeated questions can help listeners determine if the child is responding to misinformation or the real trauma of the event.

### Helping Children Cope

The following tips will help teachers and parents support children who have experienced the loss of parents, friends, or loved ones. Some of these recommendations come from Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado.

- **Allow children to be the teachers about their grief experiences:** Give children the opportunity to tell their story and be a good listener.
- **Don't assume that every child in a certain age group understands death in the same way or with the same feelings:** All children are different and their view of the world is unique and shaped by different experiences. (Developmental information is provided below.)
- **Grieving is a process, not an event:** Parents and schools need to allow adequate time for each child to grieve in the manner that works for that child. Pressing children to resume "normal" activities without the chance to deal with their emotional pain may prompt additional problems or negative reactions.
- **Don't lie or tell half-truths to children about the tragic event:** Children are often bright and sensitive. They will see through false information and wonder why you do not trust them with the truth. Lies do not help the child through the healing process or help develop effective coping strategies for life's future tragedies or losses.



- **Help all children, regardless of age, to understand loss and death:** Give the child information at the level that he/she can understand. Allow the child to guide adults as to the need for more information or clarification of the information presented. Loss and death are both part of the cycle of life that children need to understand.
- **Encourage children to ask questions about loss and death:** Adults need to be less anxious about not knowing all the answers. Treat questions with respect and a willingness to help the child find his or her own answers.
- **Don't assume that children always grieve in an orderly or predictable way:** We all grieve in different ways and there is no one "correct" way for people to move through the grieving process.
- **Let children know that you really want to understand what they are feeling or what they need:** Sometimes children are upset but they cannot tell you what will be helpful. Giving them the time and encouragement to share their feelings with you may enable them to sort out their feelings.
- **Children will need long-lasting support:** The more losses the child or adolescent suffered, the more difficult it will be to recover. This is especially true if they lost a parent who was their major source of support. Try to develop multiple supports for children who suffered significant losses.
- **Keep in mind that grief work is hard:** It is hard work for adults and hard for children as well.
- **Understand that grief work is complicated:** When death results from a terrorist act, this brings forth many issues that are difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend. Grieving will also be complicated by a need for vengeance or justice and by the lack of resolution of the current situation: Perpetrators may still be at large and our nation may go to war. The sudden nature of death and the fact that many individuals were considered missing rather than dead further complicates the grieving process.
- **Be aware of your own need to grieve:** Focusing on the children in your care is important, but not at the expense of your emotional needs. Adults who have lost a loved one will be far more able to help children work through their grief if they get help themselves. For some families, it may be important to seek family grief counseling, as well as individual sources of support.

## Developmental Phases in Understanding Death

It is important to recognize that all children are unique in their understanding of death and dying. This understanding depends on their developmental level, cognitive skills, personality characteristics, religious or spiritual beliefs, teachings by parents and significant others, input from the media, and previous experiences with death. Nonetheless, there are some general considerations that will be helpful in understanding how children and adolescents experience and deal with death.

- **Infants and Toddlers:** The youngest children may perceive that adults are sad, but have no real understanding of the meaning or significance of death.
- **Preschoolers:** Young children may deny death as a formal event and may see death as reversible. They may interpret death as a separation, not a permanent condition. Preschool and even early elementary children may link certain events and magical thinking with the causes of death. As a result of the World Trade Center disaster, some children may imagine that going into tall buildings may cause someone's death.
- **Early Elementary School:** Children at this age (approximately 5–9) start to comprehend the finality of death. They begin to understand that certain circumstances may result in death. They can see that, if large planes crash into buildings, people in the planes and buildings will be killed. However, they may over-generalize, particularly at ages 5–6 — if jet planes don't fly, then people don't die. At this age, death is perceived as something that happens to others, not to oneself or one's family.



- **Middle School:** Children at this level have the cognitive understanding to comprehend death as a final event that results in the cessation of all bodily functions. They may not fully grasp the abstract concepts discussed by adults or on the TV news but are likely to be guided in their thinking by a concrete understanding of justice. They may experience a variety of feelings and emotions, and their expressions may include acting out or self-injurious behaviors as a means of coping with their anger, vengeance and despair.
- **High School:** Most teens will fully grasp the meaning of death in circumstances such as the World Trade Center or Pentagon disasters. They may seek out friends and family for comfort or they may withdraw to deal with their grief. Teens (as well as some younger children) with a history of depression, suicidal behavior and chemical dependency are at particular risk for prolonged and serious grief reactions and may need more careful attention from home and school during these difficult times.

## Tips for Children and Teens With Grieving Friends and Classmates

Seeing a friend try to cope with a loss may scare or upset children who have had little or no experience with death and grieving. Some suggestions teachers and parents can provide to children and youth to deal with this “secondary” loss:

- Particularly with younger children, it will be important to help clarify their understanding of death. See tips above under “helping children cope.”
- Seeing their classmates’ reactions to loss may bring about some fears of losing their own parents or siblings. Children need reassurance from caretakers and teachers that their own families are safe. For children who have experienced their own loss (previous death of a parent, grandparent, sibling), observing the grief of a friend can bring back painful memories. These children are at greater risk for developing more serious stress reactions and should be given extra support as needed.
- Children (and many adults) need help in communicating condolence or comfort messages. Provide children with age-appropriate guidance for supporting their peers. Help them decide what to say (e.g., “Steve, I am so sorry about your father. I know you will miss him very much. Let me know if I can help you with your paper route...”) and what to expect (see “expressions of grief” above).
- Help children anticipate some changes in friends’ behavior. It is important that children understand that their grieving friends may act differently, may withdraw from their friends for a while, might seem angry or very sad, etc., but that this does not mean a lasting change in their relationship.
- Explain to children that their “regular” friendship may be an important source of support for friends and classmates. Even normal social activities such as inviting a friend over to play, going to the park, playing sports, watching a movie, or a trip to the mall may offer a much needed distraction and sense of connection and normalcy.
- Children need to have some options for providing support — it will help them deal with their fears and concerns if they have some concrete actions that they can take to help. Suggest making cards, drawings, helping with chores or homework, etc. Older teens might offer to help the family with some shopping, cleaning, errands, etc., or with babysitting for younger children.
- Encourage children who are worried about a friend to talk to a caring adult. This can help alleviate their own concern or potential sense of responsibility for making their friend feel better. Children may also share important information about a friend who is at risk of more serious grief reactions.
- Parents and teachers need to be alert to children in their care who may be reacting to a friend’s loss of a loved one. These children will need some extra support to help them deal with the sense of frustration and helplessness that many people are feeling at this time.



## Resources for Grieving and Traumatized Children

At times of severe stress, such as the trauma of the terrorist attacks on our country, both children and adults need extra support. Children closest to this tragedy may very well experience the most dramatic feelings of fear, anxiety and loss. They may have personally lost a loved one or know of friends and schoolmates who have been devastated by these treacherous acts. Adults need to carefully observe these children for signs of traumatic stress, depression or even suicidal thinking, and seek professional help when necessary.

Resources to help you identify symptoms of severe stress and grief reactions are available at the National Association of School Psychologist's website — [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org). See also:

### For Caregivers

Deaton, R.L. & Berkan, W.A. (1995). *Planning and managing death issues in the schools: A handbook*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group .

Mister Rogers Website: [www.misterrogers.org](http://www.misterrogers.org) (see booklet on Grieving for children 4–10 years)

Mister Rogers Website: [www.misterrogers.org](http://www.misterrogers.org) (see booklet on Grieving for children 4–10 years)

Webb, N.B. (1993). *Helping bereaved children: A handbook for practitioners*. New York: Guilford Press.

Wolfelt, A. (1983). *Helping children cope with grief*. Bristol, PA: Accelerated Development.

Wolfelt, A (1997). *Healing the bereaved child: Grief gardening, growth through grief and other touchstones for caregivers*. Ft. Collins, CO: Companion.

Worden, J.W. (1996). *Children and grief: When a parent dies*. New York: Guilford Press

### For Children:

Gootman, M.E. (1994). *When a friend dies: A book for teens about grieving and healing*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing.

Greenlee, S. (1992). *When someone dies*. Atlanta: Peachtree Publishing. (Ages 9–12).

Wolfelt, A. (2001). *Healing your grieving heart for kids*. Ft. Collins, CO: Companion. (See also similar titles for teens and adults)