

How Parents/Guardians Can Help

Parents/guardians can best facilitate much of the recovery work involving a crisis.

- The school may meet with parents/guardians in small groups and provide information on what to look for and how they can help their children.
- Some parents/guardians may need individual help before they are ready to help their children.
- The school may provide opportunities for parents/guardians to discuss in groups their own responses and worries.

Crisis and Children

When people experience a crisis, family routines often are disrupted, and parents/guardians often face additional tasks and demands on their time. A crisis can affect the members of a family or of an entire community. Often, it is hard for young children to understand what has happened during times of crisis. Some children may have completely wrong views of the situation and may need your continued guidance and understanding through the experience. How you help your own children work through their difficult times may have a lasting effect.

Children can experience the same intense feelings that adults feel about a crisis. This is a normal reaction. Some children may show their feelings in a direct and immediate fashion, while others will wait until a later time. Most children will be confused by any sudden interruptions to their routines. Crisis situations are difficult for both children and adults.

Each child in a family may react differently to crisis. Following a crisis, some children may:

- Become more active and restless.
- Become upset easily---crying and whining.
- Become afraid of loud noises, rain, storm, etc.
- Feel afraid at night or when alone.
- Behave as they did when younger. They may start sucking their thumb, wetting the bed, wanting to be held.
- Have symptoms of illness such as nausea, vomiting, and headaches, not wanting to eat.
- Be angry, they may hit, throw, or kick to show their anger, often with little provocation.
- Be quiet or withdrawn, not wanting to talk about the experience.
- Refuse to go to school or childcare arrangements. The child may not want to be out of your sight.
- Be afraid that the crisis may recur, especially if conditions recur, e.g., rain after flood or aftershocks after earthquake. They may ask frequently, "Will it come again?"
- Not show any outward signs until weeks or months later.

Ways Parents Can Help Their Children:

- Talk with your children; provide simple accurate information to questions. Allow them to tell their stories about what happened.
- Talk with your children about your own feelings.
- Listening to what your children say and how they say it. Repeating your children's words, recognizing fear, anxiety, and insecurity is very helpful. For instance: "You are afraid that ___" or, "Your wonder if the storm will come again today". This type of statement helps both you and the children clarify feelings.
- Reassure your child, "We are together." "We care about you." "We will take care of you."
- Respond to repeated questions. You may need to repeat information and reassurance often.
- Hold the child. Provide comfort. Touching is important for children during this period.
- Spend extra time putting your child to bed. Talk and offer assurance. Leave night light on if necessary.
- Observe your child at play. Listen to what is said and how the child plays. Frequently, children express feelings of fear or anger while playing with dolls, trucks, or friends.
- Provide play experiences to relieve tension. Work with play dough, paint, play in water, and give them something safe like a pillow, ball, or balloon.

Lessons Learned

As I have dealt with many crises, I have learned a number of lessons and continually modify the crisis response plan.

In the initial memo to the first-period classes, I found teachers read them at different times in the period or forgot to read them at all. Some didn't feel comfortable reading the memo; others thought it would be better at the end of class because they wanted to cover their planned material for the day. But teachers quickly learned they needed to be flexible with curriculum during the crises and not give tests or homework. I have found problems arose when students heard the memo at the end of class because they didn't have time to process it, and teachers weren't able to see which students needed support.

Empty desk: Do not remove the student's desk or belongings

Follow the deceased student's schedule

Computerized attendance system

Helping bereaved student return to school – Outreach. A home visit can help assess needs and how to address them.

Special support and accommodations at school. Staff & students need to be informed as to the plan and of ways to help the student readjust.

Support for Children, Adolescents and their Families

Common Behaviors of Grieving Children

REGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR Behaviors that a child has outgrown, such as bedwetting or separation anxiety may reappear.

The PERFECT CHILD In contrast to the regressive child, this child takes on responsibilities beyond his/her years.

INCREASED IRRITABILITY A child may begin lashing out physically or verbally at seemingly trivial incidents.

BODY DISTRESS Physical complaints may increase such as stomachaches, headaches, sleeplessness, and listlessness.

DIFFICULTY CONCENTRATING A child may have trouble completing tasks or have difficulty in school.

REFUSAL TO TALK A child may have a tough time talking about the loved one who has died. It may be helpful for the adult to give the child time and a safe place for emotions to surface.

Strategies for Helping Adolescents Provide a Safe Environment

Like adults, if they don't feel safe, they cannot do the necessary grief work.

You can help through structure, discipline, and education.

STRUCTURE and maintaining routines provides a subtle, daily sense of continuity at a time of constant change and adjustment.

REASONABLE AND CARING DISCIPLINE REASSURES children and adolescents that someone is in control and will save them from serious harm.

EDUCATION about normal grief reaction helps teens know they are not going crazy and can trust the way their body, mind, and emotions are responding. If they pull back from discussions, provide books or movies that illustrate normal grieving.

ENCOURAGE THEM TO EXPRESS WHAT THE GRIEF EXPERIENCE IS LIKE

Recognize and affirm that his/her experience is likely to be different from everyone else's in the family. Share your feelings.

TELLING STORIES ABOUT THE PERSON WHO DIES Provide them with a photo of him or her with the person. Support him or her in visiting the gravesite if that is meaningful to him/her. Make sure he/she has a memento of the person who has died... something by which to stay connected.

ENCOURAGE THE CHILD OR TEEN TO PARTICIPATE IN AGE-APPROPRIATE NORMAL LIFE, as he/she feels able. Grieving takes enormous energy, so the child or teen may need to slow down a bit while they work on grieving. However, it's important for them to know that you don't expect them to take on an adult role now that someone has died. Let the child or teen know that you care, accept and support him/her...just as he/she is now, with all the normal living, loving, and learning he/she still has yet to do.

HELPING THE GRIEVING ADOLESCENT Grieving families often feel a need to pull together for support. Since adolescence is increasingly a time for breaking away and relying on peer support, these conflicting needs can place parents/guardians and teens at odds with one another. Grieving teens feel different from their peers when they've experienced death. In an attempt to fit in, they may try to ignore their own grief reactions. Eventually, they will surface either in healthy or unhealthy ways.

Please Note: It is important to take seriously any prolonged depression or thoughts of suicide. If they persist, seek professional help for the child as soon as possible.