

Guidelines for Helping Students Deal with a Death

- Deal with your own reactions first. You won't be effective helping students unless you've been able to acknowledge your own reactions and put them into perspective.
- Keep it simple! Students need limited information about the death. Remembering these guidelines will help you keep your explanations developmentally appropriate. The bottom line is that all school-aged children need brief, simple information, balanced with reassurances that the daily structures of their lives will not change.
- Listen. Ask students how they are reacting to the death and listen to their reactions. This is not the time to share your personal reactions. Your role is to listen, validate, and support your students, especially in the early days of the crisis.
- Encourage children to put their thoughts and feelings into words, which will help begin the grief process. Labeling what you hear them saying can help in this process ("You sound very sad"; "Boy, you're really angry that your friend didn't tell you what he was planning so you could have had a chance to stop him.>").
- Give students permission to express their feelings. Since school is not necessarily a place that encourages active discussion of feelings, you will need to make the invitation to talk about reactions to a death very clear. One way you do this is through the provision of care stations. And remember, these conversations with students also offer an opportunity to further evaluate them and to provide additional in-school and community resources to assist them if it seems necessary.
- Give students permission to grieve not only the current loss but also whatever past losses may be reactivated by the event.
- Listen for expressions of guilt or an exaggerated sense of responsibility for the death, and address those misperceptions quickly and directly.
- Remember, be a good listener!