



Resources for Parents

Talking with your children about tragedy:

The sudden, unexpected and unbelievable deaths that occurred last week can be very difficult for children and adults to cope with or comprehend. The following information may be helpful to teachers, parents, and caregivers in providing support to the children who are also struggling with the loss of dear friends, playmates, and mentors.

- Children all grieve in their own unique way. At all stages of development, children are concerned about how this affects their world (school, home, friends, church). Remember each child's uniqueness as you allow them grace and support to find their way in their grief.
- Children look to adults they trust for information (truth) to help them make sense of this painful experience. Your readiness to listen, talk, and provide support will assist them in their understanding that something this horrible cannot be understood. The truth from a loving caregiver will greatly assist a child when stories and other nonfactual information may arise.
- When children are given inaccurate or NO information they are left to put the puzzle together on their own, which can add confusion and distress. Not allowing a child to process or talk often promotes unhealthy thinking and coping patterns.
- WHY questions will come and it's okay to say, "I don't know."
- We all have different answers to the WHY, and we need to be mindful of how our answers may impact our children's sense of this tragedy. Giving children the resilience to cope with the good and the bad. Providing children with the reassurance that they are loved, it is okay to be mad, sad, scared, worried, quiet, loud, etc.
- This is incomprehensible, this makes us feel angry and sad; this makes us question the good. It's okay to show our children that it is okay to feel sad and angry at what has happened.

Here are some guidelines that you may find helpful:

1. Talk open and honestly with your child
 - Set aside time as soon as possible.
 - Give child the facts as simply as possible.
 - Use correct language.
 - Ask questions, “How are you feeling?” and “How are your friends doing?”
 - Share your faith and beliefs.
 - Talk about memories.

2. Ways to help children cope
 - Allow them to continue their stories through writing, rituals, and memorials.
 - Discuss rumors and media reports so your child is able to clarify information regularly.
 - Observe their reactions, i.e. fears, bad dreams, worries and talk about them.
 - Be alert for behavioral changes and, if they concern you, seek professional help.

Developmental Grief Responses

Ages 3 to 5:

Developmental Stage: Egocentric- they believe the world centers around them. They lack the cognitive understanding of death and related concepts. They perceive a dead person as asleep, or gone away.

Ages 5 to 7:

Developmental Stage: Gaining a sense of autonomy; exploring the world outside of themselves. Death is still seen as reversible. Feeling of responsibility and guilt because of feelings and thoughts. May be interested in the physical and biological aspects of death. Common grief responses include: How? Why? Repetitive questioning, fearfulness, decrease in school performance, anger, denial, difficulty expressing their feelings of loss.

Ages 7 to 11:

Developmental Stage: Concrete thinking. Self-confidence develops. Beginning of socialization and logical thinking. Death is seen as punishment, fear of bodily harm. Starting to see death as final. Common grief responses: desire for complete detail, concerns for how others are responding, and the “right” way to respond, or confusion.

Ages 11 to 18

Developmental Stage: Formal operational problem solving. Abstract thinking. Integration of one’s own personality. Concept of death is a more “adult” approach, conceptualizing death. Common grief responses: extreme sadness, denial, anger, regression and depression. More willing to talk to people outside of family and peer support.

Some materials taken from The Dougy Center, www.dougy.org