



A Death in the Community

Many people are reluctant to talk about death, particularly with students. As Episcopalians, we recognize that at death life has changed, not ended. As members of the school community, we are positioned to provide a familiar and safe environment for students during this experience.

General Guidelines on Talking to Young People About Death

It is helpful to talk about death. The process begins by letting students know that such conversations are okay. These conversations give insight into what students know and what they don't know about the topic. Also, they allow you to have a glimpse of their past experience with loss. That opens the door to an opportunity for identifying fears and misconceptions that students might have. We offer these general guidelines about approaching these important conversations:

1. Approach the conversation as a listener. Take cues from the student. Find out what they know and what questions they have. Do not make assumptions about what they might or might not be experiencing. Being an active listener clearly demonstrates that they have permission to talk to someone who is sincerely interested in their views and questions.
2. It is not always easy to “hear” what students may be asking or what they really want to know. Be intentional before you speak. It might be necessary at times to respond to a question with a question in order to fully understand what they seek.
3. Recognize that students' reactions will vary. Some will want to talk about their feelings, some will withdraw, others may become angry and act out. Stay connected and observe. Don't push or insist that they interact based on your expectations. Rather, continue to “check in” and share the range of feelings that you may be experiencing. This will give them some words to describe their feelings if they are struggling with how to articulate their experience.
4. For some students, a “sit down, face-to-face” conversation is too intense. Consider doing something in addition to the conversation such as a walk or other type of physical activity. Being “side-by-side” as opposed to being “face-to-face” can reduce the intensity of the conversation.
5. If they have specific questions, don't be afraid to answer directly. Remember, however, that very young children are only able to absorb limited amounts of information. Answer them honestly, simply, briefly, and repeatedly when necessary. Do not give them more information they ask for or than they need.
6. It is common for students to feel guilty and angry after a close family member or friend has died. They need frequent reassurance that they have been, and will continue to be, loved and cared for.
7. Acknowledge their fears and their emotions seriously. Don't do or say anything that could be perceived as you “talking them out” of what they are thinking or feeling. Even if their concerns seem exaggerated by adult standards, take them seriously.
8. Finally, if you are feeling so upset that you don't want to talk about the death, provide the student with an honest explanation. It's not a failure to admit your humanity. You may need or want to take a “time out” and seek another adult to help.



A Death in the Community

School Protocols

It's important for a school to have a basic roadmap for how to respond when a death in the community occurs. When a death occurs, the school's Crisis Response Team should be immediately activated to address the following matters:

1. It is extremely important to verify the information from either the family members or local authorities.
2. Once the information has been verified, the Head of School or Chaplain should work with the family to determine what information should be disclosed to the school community and in what manner.
3. Notify the teachers and staff first to discuss what is known about the death. This gives the adults an opportunity to ask questions and to prepare themselves before they see their students. If a teacher does not feel able to talk to students, a member of the Crisis Response Team should be available to assist or step in.
4. Consider preparing a statement for teachers to use with students. Adults often struggle with what to say during these difficult situations. With a prepared statement, teachers can give the same information to all students simultaneously. Discuss how this can be done without being heard as "cold" or "insincere."
5. Draft a statement about the death to be distributed to parents. Template letters are available in the SAES Document Library. We advise schools to consider having template letters prepared at the start of the school year to reduce the amount of time necessary for drafting.
6. Make sure that the chaplain/pastoral team is available for counseling and student support. If available, utilize parish resources, as well. In addition, we recommend that each school develop a local counseling resource outside of the school community for times such as this. Your in-house pastoral and counseling team could need additional support.

Thoughts From SAES Heads of School

Don't hesitate to reach out to your SAES colleagues for support during this difficult time in the life of a community. While it's not a pleasant thought, most heads of school have experienced a death in the community and their experiences can be informative. Here are some suggestions that other heads offered on the topic:

1. "You likely have a community non-profit with the mission of supporting young people during times of grief. In Houston, it's Bo's Place. In Fort Worth, it's The Warm Place. Develop a relationship with them now as they were a great resource for our community when we lost a student. They are a wealth of information and will be there with you as everyone works through the grieving process."
2. "We included members of staff who had lost spouses to join our planning discussions. It's perhaps the best decision we made in this process. They provided invaluable insight into what they needed and how they felt at the time."
3. "Having a communications plan is key. We had gone through several deaths in the decade before I arrived, and many on the staff remembered what we did then. It's a good thing, because a plan of



A Death in the Community

action was not written down. Every situation is different, but having a basic outline of what needs to be attended is really useful. We're writing things down.”

4. “Don’t forget to use the parish if you are a parochial school. Your Rector and the rest of the pastoral team is equipped to respond to these circumstances and can provide additional support to the school. The Book of Common Prayer provides a wealth of resources for difficult times. The clergy were able to quickly place resources in the hands of our teachers.”

Recommended Reading for Grieving Children

[A Little Bit of Rob by Barbara J. Turner \(Author\) and Marni Backer \(Illustrator\)](#)

[Back to School: Grief in the Classroom](#)

[Badger’s Parting Gifts by Susan Varley](#)

[Don't Despair on Thursdays!: The Children's Grief-Management Book \(The Emotional Impact Series\) by Adolph Moser \(Author\) and David Melton \(Illustrator\)](#)

[Everett Anderson’s Goodbye by Lucille Clifton \(Author\) and Ann Grifalconi \(Illustrator\)](#)

[Healing Your Grieving Heart: For Kids by Alan D. Wolfelt](#)

[How I Feel: A Coloring Book for Grieving Children by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.d](#)

[I Miss you: A First Look at Death by Pat Thomas \(author\) and Leslie Harker \(Illustrator\)](#)

[I Wish I Could Hold Your Hand – A Child’s Guide to Grief and Loss by Pat Palmer \(Author\) and Dianne O’Quinn Burke \(Illustrator\)](#)

[Lifetimes: The Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children by Bryan Mellonie \(Author\) and Robert Ingpen \(Illustrator\)](#)

[Not the End by Mari Dombkowski](#)

[Sad Isn’t Bad: A Good-Grief Guidebook for Kids Dealing With Loss \(Elf-Help Books for Kids\) by Michaelene Mundy \(Author\) and R. W. Alley \(Illustrator\)](#)

[Samantha Jane’s Missing Smile by Julie Kaplow and Donna Pincus \(Authors\) and Beth Spiegel \(Illustrator\)](#)

[Tear Soup by Pat Schwiebert, and Chuck DeKlyen \(Authors\), and Taylor Bills \(Illustrator\)](#)

[The Brightest Star by Kathleen Maresh Hemery \(Author\) and Ron Boldt \(Illustrator\)](#)

[The Fall of Freddie the Leaf by Leo Buscaglia](#)

[When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death by Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Brown](#)

[When Someone Dies by Sharon Greenlee \(Author\) and Bill Drath \(Illustrator\)](#)