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COPING WITH THE DEATH OF A STUDENT OR STAFF MEMBER

Most children experience the death of a family member or friend by the time they complete high school; and one in 20 children face the death of a parent by age 16.[1] The sadness and sense of loss that results from the death of someone close can impact significantly a student's social and emotional health as well as his or her ability to learn at school. As such, bereavement is a very common experience among school-age children that holds important educational significance. Unfortunately, school staff, including school guidance counselors and other mental health professionals, often receive little training in this area. School personnel who feel unprepared or uncomfortable to help students cope with death may miss a critical opportunity to provide needed support or misinterpret learning or behavioral difficulties. This issue of ERCM*Express* highlights the range of impact death can have on a school community; addresses the importance of emergency management planning; offers suggestions for responding to a loss; discusses strategies for recovery; and suggests resources for further information.

Range of Impact

Death can have a significant impact on the abilities and behaviors of members of a school community. The degree of impact differs depending on whether the death is that of a staff member or student, the age of the student who passed away, the nature of the death, the time of year the person passed away (i.e. during summer break, at the end of the school year, during first semester), the location of the death (e.g., on-campus or off-campus), and the number of family members, such as siblings, cousins, or children, who attend the school of the deceased.

Regardless of the circumstances surrounding the death of a school-based individual, students, teachers, and staff may be impacted in a variety of ways. Academic performance may decline if a student has difficulty concentrating to learn new material. Social and emotional challenges for students or adults may result from feelings of sadness, depression, or anxiety or from withdrawing from fellow classmates, students, teachers, or staff. Young students in particular may be fearful to leave family members, resulting in school avoidance and increased absenteeism. Students may find it difficult to learn or teachers may struggle in the classroom if they experience physical symptoms, such as headaches, stomachaches, or exhaustion as a result of restless sleep. Behavioral changes such as irritability, acting out, or increased risk-taking may ensue. For younger students this could be manifested in class outbursts or bullying while substance abuse could be an issue for some older students.

1 Mahon M: Children's Concept of Death and Sibling Death from Trauma. *Journal of Pediatric Nursing*, 1993: 8(5): 335-344.

Providing both immediate and long-term support to grieving students, faculty, and staff as early as possible can support academic progress and the social, behavioral, emotional, and mental health of all members of the school community.

Barriers to Effective Bereavement Support Within Schools

Schools could be a logical and effective site for the delivery of supportive services such as additional tutoring as needed, individual counseling, or bereavement support groups. Schools have ready access to a sector of the impacted community and long-term ongoing relationships with staff, students, and families, but, despite this, there are still some barriers to providing effective bereavement support within school settings, including: limited staff expertise and training; funding constraints for mental health personnel; concerns about family privacy; and the persistent stigma associated with mental illness, which may contribute to students' reluctance to disclose their reactions or seek services.

Emergency Management Planning

Partnering With Community Mental Health Providers

Schools can prepare for responding to and recovering from the death of a student, staff, or faculty member by actively partnering with their community mental health providers prior to an incident and establishing a crisis response team that includes school social workers, psychologists, and guidance counselors. All districts and schools should create an emergency management plan in collaboration with community partners, including mental health professionals. Developing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with area mental health organizations that includes activities such as providing ongoing training of school personnel in bereavement and crisis response, supplying professional counseling services, when necessary and appropriate, to students or staff in need of assistance, and offering relief to school-based guidance counselors, social workers, and psychologists when needed could all minimize some potential barriers to recovery. Training for teachers and staff might include: an appreciation of the impact bereavement can have on learning, behavior, and development; developmental understanding of death; and age appropriate responses to support grieving students.

Elements Related to Bereavement to Include in Emergency Management Plans

Schools should develop emergency management plans that foster an open and supportive school climate and active parent involvement, and demonstrate a strategy, including clear staff roles and responsibilities, for responding proactively to losses that impact students and staff. Losses range from the death of a preschool classroom pet to a high school student suicide to a weather-related disaster that takes the lives of several school members. Plans should include policies for managing and screening community volunteers who may show up at school to lend support. Protocol for memorials should be defined in a school's emergency management plan.

School plans should also include policies and protocols for handling the media. If the death is likely to result in attention from the media such

as might be expected in a murder, suicide, or other sudden and dramatic loss, school policies and procedures should limit direct access of the media to solely the media spokesperson for the district and the school. Students should be advised to speak with school staff and their parents or guardians if they receive inquiries from the media such as phone calls, e-mails, contacts through their personal Web pages, or in person, while staff and parents should direct all media to the spokesperson. The goal is to protect the students and the school from any unwanted media attention while facilitating accurate and appropriate information regarding the incident.

Responding to the Death of a Student or Staff Member

The type of information schools should or should not share or can or cannot provide in the case of death varies based on the specific incident. Exhibit 1, Illustrative Examples of Sharing Information for Specific Incidents, offers a few examples for schools to consider regarding information sharing.

Exhibit 1: Illustrative Examples of Sharing Information for Specific Incidents

Circumstance	Can Share	Should Share	Cannot Share	Should Not Share
Suicide	▪ Directory information*		▪ Circumstances of death ▪ Information about grades, friends, coursework	▪ Anything about the student ▪ Funeral arrangements
Death by Accident *(if no violation of the law)*	▪ Directory information ▪ Funeral arrangements*	▪ Directory information*	▪ Cause of accident (refer to law enforcement) ▪ Information about grades, friends, coursework	
Perpetrator in a Crime	▪ Directory information*		▪ Details of crime, any subsequent criminal or legal action (refer to law enforcement) ▪ Information about grades, friends, coursework	▪ Anything about the student ▪ Funeral arrangements
Death by illness or disease	▪ Directory information ▪ Funeral arrangements *	▪ Directory information *	▪ Circumstances of death ▪ Information about grades, friends, coursework	
** Only after consultation with the family*				

Verification of Information

When a student or staff member passes away, school personnel may want to share the news of the loss with the school community. Verification of information is one of the initial steps in this process. Potential sources of accurate information include family members, local police in certain circumstances, or disaster relief agencies in the event of a natural disaster. In the death of a student or staff member, school personnel should contact family members to determine what they would like to have disclosed to the school community. Once the death and the appropriate details surrounding the incident have been verified, activation of the school crisis team, initiation of the emergency management plan, and notification of the school community can occur.

Sharing the News With Crisis Team Members and Other Faculty and Staff

The degree of information shared and the audience it is shared with will vary depending on the type of death. For example, the school will likely respond differently to a student who lost a parent than it would to a class of students who

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR SENSITIVE DEATHS

When the cause of death is particularly sensitive, such as suicide or drugs or alcohol, it is important to contact the family to identify what information they wish shared with the school community and to help them understand the benefit of open discussion with students in order to help identify other students who may be at risk of, or already considering, engaging in these life-threatening behaviors. It is not necessary to obtain parent permission to share information that is widely available publicly, for example, if suicide as the cause of death has been announced in public media. Special effort is needed to:

- Identify students at increased risk of adjustment problems, especially students who may have been aware of the suicide plan or who may become scapegoats, such as the former boy or girlfriend if the suicide occurred after a couple broke up;
- Provide education to students, parents, and staff about the warning signs and symptoms of suicide or risky behaviors and how to access school and community support services;
- Encourage students to seek help and reduce the stigma associated with seeking and accepting mental health services;
- Avoid romanticizing the cause of death while at the same time acknowledging the individual who died;
- Minimize media coverage; and
- Communicate with community mental health providers and agencies and the police to monitor possible additional deaths from high-risk behaviors that could occur within the community.

lost a teacher or a school that experienced death as the result of a school shooting. School officials and crisis team members must adapt their approach to match the particular circumstance.

Schools should have procedures in place for notifying crisis team members and other school faculty and staff. If the death occurs during the school day, administrators may call an emergency staff meeting and use this time to share the news, confirm a plan of action, reiterate roles and responsibilities as laid out in the emergency management plan, identify and dispel rumors, allow for questions and discussions, and—especially for teachers of younger children—provide advice on how to inform students. If the event takes place outside of school hours, including during vacations or summer recess, schools could activate phone trees, e-mail or text messaging chains, or an automated messaging system to invite staff to a meeting to brief them on the loss and confirm a plan of action, if deemed necessary, based on the emergency management plan.

Talking With Students About the Loss

Strategies for talking with children and young adults about the death of a fellow student, staff member, teacher, family member, or friend will vary greatly depending on the age and maturity level of the audience. Tasking classroom teachers with sharing the news and facilitating discussion may be appropriate for younger children; however, older students may be more likely to already have information about the event so may be more interested in information about what happens next, such as memorials, opportunities for grieving, etc.

Reading a brief statement to students, within small, naturally occurring groups such as homeroom or first-period class, can be used for initial notification and to outline support services that will be provided. It is important that schools plan for notifying students who are not on campus at the time (e.g., those who are

WHAT TO SAY: APPROPRIATE STATEMENTS AND POTENTIALLY UNHELPFUL APPROACHES

When considering what to say, the goal of the communication should be kept in focus: to assist those who are grieving in expressing their feelings and reactions in a safe and supportive environment without trying to alter those feelings.

Appropriate Statements:

- "I'm so sorry to hear about your brother's death. Is there something that I can do that will be helpful?"
- "I am so sad to hear about your friend's death; I can only imagine what you may be going through."
- "I heard that your cousin died last week. I understand that it may be difficult to concentrate or learn as well when you are grieving; I would like you to let me know if you find yourself having any difficulty with your school work so that we can figure out together how to make it easier for you during this difficult time."
- "I'm so sorry that your teacher died. Please know that I am here whenever you want to talk or just wish to be with someone."

Potentially Unhelpful Approaches and Corresponding Statements:

- Emphasizing a positive perspective or trying to cheer people up
- "At least he had a good life before he died."
- "I'm sure you will feel better soon."

Encouraging them to be strong or hide their feelings

- "You don't want to upset the other students or have them see you cry."

Telling them you know how they are feeling or ought to be feeling

- "I know exactly what you are going through."
- "You must be angry." Instead, demonstrate your own feelings and express sympathy.

Competing for sympathy

- "Both of my parents died when I was your age."

on field trips or absent). Notifying students via large assemblies and public address systems should be avoided as they tend to be impersonal and do not allow the speaker to be responsive to student reactions. Letters can be sent home with students for parent notification and-or posted on the school's Web site.[2] For major events, automated messaging systems or e-mail listservs can be utilized to share information.

2 Sample templates for letters of notification of parents, students, and staff can be downloaded from www.cincinnatichildrens.org/svc/alpha/s/school-crisis/letters-template.htm.

Providing Classroom Assistance

The crisis team should have a plan in place to assist in message delivery to classrooms in which a teacher does not feel able to notify or comfortable notifying the class or facilitating a brief discussion. For K–8 classrooms of a student who passed away it may be helpful to assign a mental health personnel to that class. Extra support may also be needed in classrooms of siblings, cousins, or close friends of the student who passed. Older students who are not assigned to a stationary classroom may benefit from having support staff and mental health personnel available in a designated room on campus.

If the crisis involves the death of a teacher, the school may consider assigning, at least for a couple of days, a teacher from the same or lower grade to the deceased teacher's class who is familiar with the students, or a staff member from the school crisis response team. Even if the crisis does not involve the death of a teacher, it is often quite helpful to arrange for a few substitute teachers, if only to provide rotating coverage for the teaching staff so that they can access their own support services during the school day.

Legislative Authorities for Releasing Student Information

There are two legislative authorities for releasing student information: *Family Education Rights and Privacy Act* (*FERPA*) and *Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act* (*HIPAA*). *FERPA* requires that local education agencies provide parents notification annually about the release of allowable information via a notice in a registration package, a notice in a local paper, a notice in the student handbook distributed each year, or a posting on the school's Web site. *HIPAA* ensures continued health insurance coverage to individuals who change jobs and establishes standards regarding the electronic sharing of health information. For purposes of *HIPAA*, "covered entities" include health plans, health care clearinghouses, and health care providers that transmit health information in electronic form in connection with covered transactions. Exhibit 2, Legislative Authorities for Releasing Student Information, outlines who is protected, what information is protected, what information can be released, and illustrative circumstances when information can be released without permission under each law.

Exhibit 2: Legislative Authorities for Releasing Student Information

Who Is Protected	What Information Is Protected	What Information Can Be Released	Illustrative Circumstances When Information Can Be Released Without Permission
FERPA			
Privacy interests of students, of any age, enrolled in a public (and some private) elementary, secondary, or postsecondary institution **Parents* have:** 1. Right to access and amend children's education records; and 2. Some control over the disclosure of these records. **Education agencies and institutions cannot share without the parents' consent:** 1. Student records; and 2. Personally identifiable information in the record.	**Education records that contain:** ■ Grades ■ Classes ■ Class schedules ■ Teachers	**Personal notes made by teachers or staff if:** ■ Kept in sole possession of the maker ■ Not accessible to any other person, except a substitute ■ Used as a memory aide **Directory information:** ■ Student's name ■ Student's address ■ Telephone number ■ Date and place of birth ■ Honors and awards ■ Dates of attendance ■ Family members' names ■ School activities ■ Height and weight of athletes **Records created and maintained by a law enforcement unit for law enforcement purposes**	**Judicial orders or lawfully issued subpoenas:** ■ Schools must make a reasonable effort to notify the parent or student in advance. **Health and safety emergencies:** ■ Can be released to appropriate officials if information contained in the record is needed to protect the health or safety of the student or other individuals. **State and local authorities within a juvenile justice system, pursuant to a specific state law:** ■ Can be released to state and local juvenile justice authorities after the school receives written certification that information will not be disclosed to any other agency, organization, or third party without the parent's permission, except as allowed in state law.

Exhibit 2 (Con't.): Legislative Authorities for Releasing Student Information

Who Is Protected	What Information Is Protected	What Information Can Be Released	Illustrative Circumstances When Information Can Be Released Without Permission
HIPAA			
▪ Covered entities, such as health care workers, which include school nurses, only if they transmit health information electronically in connection with a HIPAA transaction.	**Protected information is any information held by the school nurse or school that:** ▪ Identifies an individual. **Relates to:** ▪ Past, present, or future physical or mental health or condition; or ▪ Past, present, or future payment for the provision of health care to the individual.	▪ Information considered "education records" under FERPA is exempt from HIPAA requirements as long as the information is in the *aggregate* and does not include personally identifiable information such as the 'directory' information stated above, or any information that could easily be traced to a student's identity.	▪ Information considered "education records" under FERPA as long as the information is in the *aggregate* and does not include personally identifiable information.

Source: National Forum on Education Statistics. (2006). *Forum Guide to the Privacy of Student Information: A Resource for Schools* (NFES 2006–805). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

* *Parent is defined as: natural or adoptive parent, a legal guardian, or an individual acting as a parent in absence of a parent of guardian*

Strategies for Recovery

Opportunities for small group or individual discussions

Students often benefit from the opportunity to talk in small groups with their peers and teachers, or individually, about a death and their own associated reactions and feelings. Students may express many different reactions and emotions, including guilt, even if there is no rational reason why they may feel responsible, and regret, especially if they had mistreated the deceased in the past or simply had not offered their friendship or support. Adolescents, especially when a death is a suicide, are particularly likely to experience these feelings, resulting in self-blame. Younger students are more likely to be confused about what has occurred or to reach inaccurate conclusions based on misinterpretations or misconceptions, for example, concerns that the teacher died of a heart attack because of the student's misbehavior or worries about dying from a non-contagious condition.[3]

Writing Letters or Drawing Pictures for the Family of the Deceased

To minimize feelings of guilt and to help process loss, teachers may provide opportunities in the classroom setting for students to write about or otherwise express their feelings about their loss. Adolescents may want opportunities to journal

3 For further information on young children's understanding of death and how to structure explanations, see Schonfeld D: Talking with children about death. *Journal of Pediatric Health Care* 1993; 7: 269-274.

while younger students may wish to write letters or draw pictures to send to the family of the deceased. Student letters, notes, or artwork for families should be reviewed before they are shared to ensure that well-intentioned but potentially non-supportive statements, comments, or pictures are not shared with grieving family members. When creative writing or artwork is used, teachers should seek adequate input from mental health professionals to avoid over-interpretation and to obtain advice on how to ensure that students receive appropriate services if they are demonstrating distress from the recent death or experiencing problems from unrelated events that have surfaced in the aftermath of the crisis. Activities that solicit anonymous statements, such as inviting students to write messages on a poster that is placed in an unmonitored location, should be avoided, especially in the setting of very traumatic losses, such as suicide or homicide, as school staff may not be able to respond appropriately to worrisome statements about suicide or threats for example.

Designate Areas for Further Support

Support rooms for students and for school personnel can be staffed by mental health professionals from the school system or the community. Prior to any event, schools should establish policies for how students will access these support services. In establishing these policies, the following questions should be considered: Is parent or guardian notification or permission required? Are children self-referred or do they require referral by a school staff member? Do they require a pass? Who will escort students who are very distressed? Do they need to report back to class before the end of a class period so that their whereabouts can be monitored? Furthermore, in some situations schools may consider limiting off-grounds privileges in the immediate aftermath of a crisis and establish policies that require students to be cleared before leaving school during the day and dismissed early only to the legal guardian or designee. After a major event, support services may be offered to students and staff before, during, and after the regular school day, and may also include services for interested family members. These services could occur on campus for a brief time after the incident, and after a few days the school may want to outsource the services by referring persons to pre-designated community mental health professionals.

Monitoring and Referring Persons Needing Additional Support

The crisis response team should consider providing outreach to individuals who may be more likely to need and benefit from additional support. This might include, but is not limited to:

- Close friends of the deceased;
- Students, current or past teachers, coaches, and staff who shared a class or group activity with the deceased (for example, schools could have a member of the crisis response team follow the student's schedule to identify classes, individuals, or groups that may benefit from extra attention);
- Students and staff who shared a similar characteristic with the deceased (for example, if the death was from a motor vehicle accident, then student drivers may be impacted more; if the death was from a chronic illness, students or staff with the same or other chronic illness may benefit from more assistance);

- Students or adults who had a difficult relationship with the deceased;
- Students with pre-existing mental health problems;
- Staff or students whose family member recently died from an unrelated cause; and
- Students who attend other schools, particularly if the deceased transferred or has siblings or relatives who attend another school (a districtwide database can assist in identifying schools to contact in these cases).

Schools, in conjunction with their mental health community partners, should work to establish an environment that is supportive of seeking and accepting assistance and encourage staff and students to refer individuals who express distress. These partners should emphasize to students that it is not safe to hold in confidence remarks by other students who are harboring suicidal thoughts or making threatening statements.

Commemorations and Memorials

If many in the school were impacted by the death, consideration should be given to issues of commemoration and memorialization of the deceased. These activities should not be an early focus of the response because that could signal to the school community that its members are expected to "move past" their initial reactions. The goal is to remember the individual who died rather than glamorize the means of death, and the school should strive for less formal but thoughtful responses guided by active student input. Policies should be developed for minimizing spontaneous memorials and addressing them when they are created. An ERCM*Express* newsletter specifically devoted to memorials can be found at www.ercm.org.

Attending Funerals and Memorial Services

Students may wish to participate in funeral and memorial activities and benefit from doing so. Schools could communicate with the family to find out the time and location of services and their wishes about attendance of students and staff. If the funeral is going to be held during school hours and it is likely that many students or staff will wish to attend, schools could explore with the family the option of offering visitation hours or a memorial service as an alternative outside of school hours. Emergency management plans should include policies for attending funerals and memorial services that address such issues as attendance during school hours, requirements for permission slips and parent chaperons, and the like.

Removing Personal Effects in a Timely Fashion

The desk or personal effects of the deceased may serve as painful reminders to survivors. School emergency management teams should draw on the input of classmates and staff about how to deal with such permanent reminders in a manner that is respectful and meaningful to the school community. Schools should arrange a location such as the administrator's office, and a time, possibly outside school hours, with parents and family members, for the return of personal belongings from lockers, classrooms, display cases, etc. Schools may want to consider inviting a member of the crisis response team to be present.

Ongoing Support

Maintaining communication among school staff and parents when appropriate can facilitate ongoing monitoring of students' academic progress, social interactions, and

RESOURCES

National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

The NCSCB provides free consultation and technical assistance to schools related to bereavement and school crisis events. The NCSCB aims to serve as a resource for information, training materials, consultation, and technical assistance for school systems, professional training programs, professional organizations, and agencies in order to further the role schools can take in supporting students, staff, and families at times of crisis and loss.

www.cincinnatichildrens.org/school-crisis

The Dougy Center for Grieving Children and Families

The Dougy Center provides peer support groups for grieving children in Portland, Oregon, and provides training and technical assistance to establish peer support groups throughout the country. The center's Web site includes a directory of programs across the country and internationally that serve grieving children, teens, and their families.

www.dougy.org

peer relationships; identification of students or staff likely to benefit from additional school- or community-based services; and needs assessment. Schools should plan for additional services at times that may trigger grief reactions, such as the anniversary of the death, graduation, the prom, athletic events, after the death of another member of the school community.

Conclusion

The death of a family member, friend, teacher, or colleague is a common experience for many that nonetheless can have a significant impact on one's social, emotional, and academic functioning. Schools may be in a position to support those grieving and, with the assistance of the mental health community, help them learn how to cope with loss. As with other crisis events, preparation, training, a comprehensive emergency management plan, and a well-functioning crisis response team go a long way toward minimizing the negative impact of loss and promoting adjustment and coping of students and staff.

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For information about the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools grant (formerly the Emergency Response and Crisis Management grant) program, contact Tara Hill (tara.hill@ed.gov), Michelle Sinkgraven (michelle.sinkgraven@ed.gov), or Sara Strizzi (sara.strizzi@ed.gov). Suggestions for newsletter topics should be sent to the ERCM TA Center Suggestion Box at http://ercm.ed.gov/

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