



SCHOOL DISTRICT 46 SUNSHINE COAST

SUPPORTING CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES THROUGH GRIEF

Talking with children and youth about loss, grief, and death

Understanding loss and death can be confusing for some children or youth. Here are some ideas about how to speak with children and youth about death and some information to help navigate these ongoing conversations.

Self-Awareness

- Check in with yourself to be sure you're ready to have this talk, and ask for support if you would like another adult to be with you while having these conversations.
- It's okay to show that you're sad and grieving, too.
- Model healthy ways to grieve, but be aware that very strong feelings can be stressful for children or youth, so be sure to reassure them that you are okay.

Clear, direct language

- Give clear information in simple, direct language spoken in a kind, caring authentic way.
- Tell the child the truth in words they understand.
- Do not use euphemisms such as "gone to sleep" or compare death with another other state of consciousness because this will be very confusing and potentially scary.
- Reassure children and youth that they are safe & their parents are safe.
- If applicable, state that the disease was not contagious.

Feelings

- Let them know that it's okay and normal to have a variety of feelings or not to feel very much at times.
- Validate their feelings and accept the range of emotions, including laughter and happiness.
- Feelings can change over time and different people have different ways of processing sad news.
- Help label feelings and model that it's okay to share feelings.
- Listen and comfort. Some children/youth will have questions. Others may not react. That's okay.
- Reassure them that strong feelings are normal and it's okay to grieve.
- A book or story will be helpful to read (at home or as a class).

Remembering

- Sharing memories - some children/youth will want to talk together about the person who has passed away. It's a healthy part of the grieving process to talk about the person who has passed away and share memories together, though not everyone may want to participate at the same time.
- If they'd like to do something, art or craft activities can be a nice way to remember the person they have lost, and it can help them say good-bye.
- Understand children might need to talk about this again and again as time goes on, and it will come up over time.

Regular routines and structure, gently

- After you've talked about it & acknowledged feelings, move on to something that's part of the regular routine.
- Normal life routines and structure (gently, within reason) are very important and helpful for children and youth to feel safe and stable.

Preparation and education

- As appropriate, explain things that will be happening. Depending on age or life experience, they may not really know what a memorial service is like, or what to expect when visiting a sick relative.
- Some children or youth may want to go to the service, while others may not. Include them and let them have a say in some decisions around memorial services etc.

Loss and Grief

- Death is not the only loss we encounter in our lives, and each loss has the potential to tap into previous losses such as the death of grandparent, a pet, other loved ones, or transitions such as moving, changing schools, divorce etc. When this happens, the current grief can be more intense, even for those who were not close to the person who died.
- Transitions usually include mixed feelings of loss and gain, sadness and excitement, and things that are lost could potentially return (for example, with a broken arm, the loss of use of the arm will return once it has healed).
- With death comes the processing, eventual understanding, and acceptance that the loved one who passed away will not be coming back.
- The grieving process takes a different amount of time for different people, depending on factors such as age, previous life experience, and even personality.

In the Classroom (in addition to the points above)

- Art activities, books, and conversations can be helpful to students. Examples include drawings, cards, a collective card they sign for the family or their classmate.
- Coach them to write something positive they knew about this person, or something positive they can do when their friend (in the case of a friend who has lost a sibling, parent, or other loved one) returns to class.
- Reassure the students that simply letting the classmate know they care about them can be very helpful.
- Talk about first day back for students who have lost someone and the expectation of respect and kindness from the classes. Role model the tone you'd like to see.
- Be aware of anything the family may have requested as far as what can and can't be shared or what requests the child might have about their return.
- What the classmate/friend needs:
 - Your friend/classmate will sometimes need some extra kindness but other times will just want to play and go about their as they usually would.
 - Understand that sometimes your friend will be sad and other times they won't.
 - They'll start to feel better over time, but it could take a long time.
 - Remind them of the importance of listening and of the importance of getting back to routines as the child is ready.
 - The other students should include them, or at least offer to include them.
 - Possible conversation openers (and you could brainstorm more in more kid-language, depending on the age).
 - "I'm really sorry about your mom. I've been thinking about you a lot."
 - "I'm feeling sad for you and I care about you."
 - "I'm not sure if you want to talk about it or not, but either way is fine with me."
 - "I can . . . at recess if you'd like."