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| Sample School Crisis Plan *Crisis Management* | 2010 |
| This sample will outline a basic Crisis Plan. To apply it to your school you may need to make adjustments and add your own information. You are encouraged to adapt it to best meet the needs of your school. School Crisis Plans should be updated regularly. |  |



This document was created by the Chicago Public School’s Crisis Management Department in 2010. This document should not be copied or distributed without consent of the Crisis Intervention Department.

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**Crisis Plan Components**

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* The Sample Plan includes all of the above components.
* Schools are encouraged to adapt the plan to best fit the needs of their school.
* However, every school should have a plan that reflects the general components of the Sample Plan.

**Definitions**

**What is a School Crisis?**

* It is a sudden, unexpected, or unanticipated critical incident that disrupts the school day and may interfere with teaching, learning, attendance and behavior.
* Implies that the individual’s usual coping mechanisms may not be sufficient to handle a particular situation.
* Include: “experiencing, witnessing, and/or learning about and event that involves the actual death or physical injury, and or threatened death or physical injury” (APA, 2000, p.463).

**What is the purpose of Crisis Intervention?**

* To restore the individuals involved to pre-crisis levels of functioning by:
	+ Assuring that tragic events or occurrences are not ignored.
	+ Assisting students, faculty, parents and other school staff in dealing with emotional responses.
	+ Decreasing the proliferation of rumors through the sharing of facts.
	+ Securing and coordinating the services of community agencies as needed.

**School Crisis Team Roles and Responsibilities**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Position | Responsibility | Assigned Staff |
| Incident Commander(Principal or designee) | 1. Verification of facts.
2. Spokesperson for the school.
3. Contacts CAO/MSD.
4. Contacts OSES Crisis Intervention Unit.
5. Responsible for overall management.
6. Delegates responsibility.
7. Written/oral communication to staff, parents, students and media.
8. Making all other notifications as required.
9. Notifies other neighborhood schools (if needed).
10. Assesses financial needs of family (death, fire, etc.)
 |  |
| Crisis Team Leader | 1. Accountable to the principal
2. Convenes Crisis Team and assigns roles and responsibilities
3. Secures rooms for debriefing and room(s) for counseling
4. Compiles list of students at risk
5. Address follow-up issues
6. Organizes and convenes morning and afternoon debriefings
7. Orients the “outside team members” to school facilities
8. Coordinates contact with parents
9. Documents information for the principal
 |  |
| Crisis Counselors(Counselors, Nurses, Psychologists, and Social Workers)  | 1. Counseling and intervention.
2. Identify high-risk students.
3. Address follow-up issues with high-risk students and parents.
4. Provide referrals to both students and parents.
5. Contact community agencies for additional support/ counseling.
6. Make parent contact as necessary.
7. Available for individual or group counseling
 |  |
| Medical Coordinator(School Nurse) | 1. Assesses medical emergencies.
2. Maintains contact with area hospitals.
3. Notification/ contact with primary physician.
4. Addresses medical facts and concerns in the classrooms as well as for general school.
5. Provides outside resources along support and follow-up.
6. Provides follow-up on high-risk students.
 |  |
| School Security and Local Police | 1. Gather facts concerning any safety issues, threats, or retaliation and report those concerns or facts to the CPD and Safety and Security Officer.
2. Secure school perimeters (internally and externally).
3. Contact Chicago Police Department (CPD) Commander to request deployment of police presence, if warranted.
 |  |
| Engineer | 1. Determines with principal if building is safe for occupancy.
2. Makes appropriate contact with supervisors.
3. Assists in evacuation procedures as needed.
4. Organizes maintenance crew for any special accommodations that will be needed.
 |  |
| Teachers | 1. Provide accurate information to students in a developmentally appropriate manner.
2. Read script when appropriate.
3. Assist in class discussions.
4. Dispel rumors.
5. Model appropriate response.
6. Identify students who are in need of counseling.
 | **All teachers** |

**Communication Plans**

**Why is it important to have a communication plan?**

* Having a preset plan of communication allows for your school to disseminate key information immediately.
* It helps to provide all stakeholders (staff, students, parents, community, etc) with a unified understanding of the situation.
* It allows the school to decrease rumors and speculation.

**What types of communication plans should be in place?**

* **Telephone Tree:** A phone tree will primarily serve to inform your School Crisis Team and other staff members about the situation. A sample phone tree can be found on pages 8-9.
* **Letter to parents/guardians:** A letter should be sent home to guardians informing them of the situation and details about how the school responded. Letters should be approved by CPS Department of Communications prior to being sent out (773-). Sample letters can be found on pages 10-13.
* **Script:** A script can be used to inform students of the situation. Scripts allow for the same information to be shared with multiple classrooms simultaneously. A sample script can be found on page 14.

\*Note: It is highly encouraged that information not be communicated to students via an intercom announcement or an assembly.

**PHONE TREE**

SAMPLE

**What is a Call Down Procedure and Why Is It Useful?**

A call down is a series of telephone calls from one person to the next used to relay specific information. An established and exercised call down protocol can be used during crisis and emergency situations. This sample call-down procedure is intended to be adapted for use by individual schools.Using the phone tree system can spread a message quickly and efficiently to a large number of people.

**When Calling:**

* The person at the top will start the tree and it may be helpful to have a brief script complete with the specific action.
* Ask the person to get paper and pencil to write specifics.
* Give facts about the event.
* Please be sure that you have alternative phone numbers.
* If nobody is answering, leave a message and call the next person. This should ensure that everyone gets the information in a timely fashion.
* Confirm they will be making the next call on the list.
* Prearrange with staff at the end of the list to contact the person at the top once they receive the message. The *LAST* person on the phone tree should *CALL THE FIRST* person to ensure that the tree is completed and that the message was accurate.
* Hold message drills regularly to test your phone tree for effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. The drill also helps to update phone numbers.

**Sample Letter: Death of Student**

Month, Day, Year

Dear Parents / Guardians and Community Members:

It is with deep sadness that we inform you about a recent loss to our school community. On (insert date), (insert name) passed away due to (insert cause of death) that occurred on (insert address if known) at (insert time if known). Our thoughts are with (his/her) family during this difficult time. This loss is sure to raise many emotions, concerns, and questions for the entire school, especially our students.

Chicago Public Schools has a Crisis Intervention Team made up of professionals trained to help with the needs of students, parents, and school personnel at difficult times such as this. These individuals will be in the building over the next several days to assist our school community. Our own counselors, social workers, and psychologists will work closely with this team and then continue to be available for students who need continuing services. Also, we have enclosed some information on what parents and caregivers can do to help their student.

Additionally, (insert school name) is working closely with the Chicago Public School’s Office of Safety & Security as well as the Chicago Police Department to provide additional security presence in the school and out of the school during key transition times such as dismissal.

We are saddened by this loss and will do everything we can to help you and your student.

Sincerely,

Principal

***Muerte de un Estudiante:***

Fecha

Queridos Padres/ Guardianes/ Miembros de la Comunidad:

Con profunda tristeza les informamos acerca del fallecimiento de un alumno de la escuela. El (insert date), el alumno/a (insert name) falleció debido a (insert cause of death) ocurrida a las (insert time of death, if available). Nuestros pensamientos se encuentran con su familia en este difícil momento. Seguramente, esta perdida elevará emociones, preocupaciones, y preguntas en la comunidad escolar, especialmente en nuestros estudiantes.

Las Escuelas Públicas de Chicago (CPS) tienen un Equipo de Intervención en Crisis compuesto por profesionales entrenados para ayudar a estudiantes, familiares, y personal de la escuela en momentos como este. El Equipo de Intervención en Crisis estará en la escuela en los próximos días para asistir a la comunidad escolar. Así mismo, los Consejeros, Trabajadores Sociales y Psicólogos Escolares de la escuela trabajarán conjuntamente con este equipo y continuarán estando disponibles para los alumnos/as que necesitasen servicios por tiempo prolongado. Adjunta, se encuentra información acerca de como padres y maestros pueden ayudar a los estudiantes en esta crisis.

Adicionalmente, la escuela (insert name of the school) estará trabajando cercanamente con la Oficina de Seguridad Escolar de las Esculeas Publicas de Chicago, así como con el Departamento de Policía de al Ciudad de Chicago para proveer de seguridad adicional en la escuela así como en los alrededores de la misma, especialmente durante la salida.

Estamos sumamente entristecidos por esta perdida y haremos todo lo posible para ayudar a Uds. y a la comunidad escolar.

Los saluda atentamente,

Firma del Director de la Escuela

***Sample Letter: Death of Staff Member***

Month, Day, Year

Dear Parents / Guardians and Community Members:

It is with deep sadness that we inform you about a recent loss to our school community. On (insert date), (insert name), a valued member of our staff, passed away due to (insert cause of death). Our thoughts are with (his/her) family during this difficult time. This loss is sure to raise many emotions, concerns, and questions for the entire school, especially our students.

Chicago Public Schools has a Crisis Intervention Team made up of professionals trained to help with the needs of students, parents, and school personnel at difficult times such as this. These individuals will be in the building over the next several days to assist our school community. Our own counselors, social workers, and psychologists will work closely with this team and then continue to be available for students who need continuing services.

We are saddened by this loss and will do everything we can to help you and your student.

At this time funeral arrangements are unknown. Information about the date, time, and location of the funeral will be posted in the main office once it is received.

Sincerely,

Principal

***Muerte de un maestro/a:***

Fecha

Queridos Padres, Guardianes, y Miembros de la Comunidad:

Con tristeza profunda les informamos sobre una reciente pérdida para nuestra comunidad escolar. En el día……… un valorado miembro de nuestro personal, falleció debido a ..... Nuestros pensamientos están con su familia en este difícil momento. Seguramente, esta pérdida está planteará muchas dudas, preocupaciones, y preguntas en toda la comunidad escolar, y especialmente en nuestros estudiantes.

Las Escuelas Públicas de Chicago (CPS) tienen un equipo de la Intervención en Crisis compuesto de profesionales entrenados para ayudar a estudiantes, padres, y personal de la escuela en momentos tan difíciles como estos. El Equipo de Intervención en Crisis estará en el edificio durante los próximos días para asistir a nuestra comunidad escolar.

Así mismo, nuestros Consejeros, Asistentes sociales, y Psicólogos trabajarán de cerca con este equipo y continuarán ayudando a estudiantes durante el tiempo que lo necesiten.

Esta pérdida nos entristecemos y haremos todo posible para ayudar a Ustedes y a sus hijos.

Actualmente, no tenemos información acerca del velatorio o entierro. Sin embargo, una vez recibida la información sobre fecha, hora y lugar del entierro, la misma se encontrará a su disposición en la oficina principal.

Sinceramente,

Firma del Director de la Escuela

***Sample Script:***

It is with much sadness that we inform you that your classmate (insert name) passed away due to (insert cause of death) that occurred (insert day/date).  Our thoughts are with (his/her) family during this difficult time.  This loss is sure to raise many emotions, concerns, and questions for the entire school.  In order to help us cope with this tragic news, social workers, psychologists, counselors, as well as members from the CPS Crisis Team are available to talk with students and staff members.  They are located in Room #\_\_\_\_\_ and you are encouraged to seek them out as needed.

***Security Concerns when pertinent****:* To ensure your safety throughout the school day and during dismissal the CPS Department of Safety & Security has assigned additional security guards to the school.  The Chicago Police Department has also dedicated additional patrol officers to assist the surrounding community during dismissal in an effort to maintain safety and security.  The Youth Outreach Program can be observed wearing bright yellow jackets and these individuals will be assisting students with safe passage during dismissal.

***Tips for teachers:***

*-Keep the information you initially provide brief and simple.*

*-Share all important facts as to avoid speculation from students.*

*-Have counselors and social workers available to assist teachers in the event that the teacher is overwhelmed by the class’s response.  Ensure that the teacher is aware that he/she is not expected to provide counseling, but that it is helpful for students to receive this type of news from someone familiar.*

**Crisis Intervention Response and Recovery:**

**Structure of response:**

* The response is divided into three parts:
	+ **First meeting:** The first meeting should take place before the school day begins, or if the crisis occurs during the school day, it should occur as soon as possible.
	+ **Second meeting:** The second meeting should take place midway through the crisis response.
	+ **Third meeting:** The third meeting should occur at the end of the school day. The third meeting serves as the time to plan for recovery and next steps.
* Activities specific to each meeting are detailed in the following plan.
* The meetings are structured to allow the School Crisis Team to engage in various levels of triage, ultimately resulting in the identification of students/staff members who need Crisis Intervention.
* All other elements of your plan (roles and responsibilities, communication plans, etc) will be a central role in your response.
* The School Crisis Team should print and fill out the Response Plan as appropriate.
* Keep a copy of the completed plan and sign in sheets (pages 20-22) for your records.

**First Meeting:** Location: Time:

**1. Identity crisis planning participants:**

Please check all staff who are present at the meeting. Additionally, staff should sign in on the attached “Staff Sign-In” sheet.

* Administrator
* Social Worker
* Counselor
* Psychologist
* Nurse
* Safety and Security
* Crisis Intervention Specialist

**2. Utilize your communication plans to determine how information will be disseminated to staff, students, and parents.**

**3. Determine which staff member(s) will be responsible for following the schedule of the deceased student/staff member or affected classroom(s):**

Coverage:

**4. Identify overflow room and coverage:**

Overflow Room #: Coverage:

Use the “Sign in Sheet” (page--) to track students who have been seen in overflow room.

*Please provide Kleenex, markers, paper, and water in the overflow room.*

**5. Develop a list of at-risk students based on the descriptors listed below:**

*Criteria to target students in need of support:*

1. *Physical proximity:* Students who witnessed/ were at the site when the incident occurred.
2. *Emotional proximity:* Siblings, cousins, close friends.
3. *Vulnerability factors:* Students who recently experienced a loss/ shooting/ any other experience that might be triggered by this incident.

Determine how these students will be identified and addressed.

**Second Meeting:** Location: Time:

**1. Identity crisis planning participants:**

Please check all staff who are present at the meeting. Additionally, staff should sign in on the attached “Staff Sign-In” sheet.

* Administrator
* Social Worker
* Counselor
* Psychologist
* Nurse
* Safety and Security
* Crisis Intervention Specialist

**2. Develop a list of students who have not been seen yet that were referred by other students or staff members.**

**3. Develop a list of additional classrooms and groups that need debriefing** (i.e.: clubs, groups, sports, individual classrooms).

**4. Discuss effectiveness of crisis response and any evaluate gaps in coverage or response.**

Recommendations:

**5. Determine what level of support will be needed for the remainder of the day.**

**Third Meeting:** Location: Time:

**1. Identity crisis planning participants:**

Please check all staff who are present at the meeting. Additionally, staff should sign in on the attached “Staff Sign-In” sheet.

* Administrator
* Social Worker
* Counselor
* Psychologist
* Nurse
* Safety and Security
* Crisis Intervention Specialist

**2. Develop a list of students who need additional follow up services and determine which staff member is responsible for meeting with identified students:**

**4. Identify community agencies/referrals for services that cannot be provided within the school:**

Agency Agency

 Phone # Phone #

**5. Discuss and plan for level of coverage needed for the following day.**

**6. Discuss the school’s plan for in handling or participating in funeral/memorial activities:**

**7. Utilize the Crisis Response Activities Checklist to discuss and evaluate the effectiveness of crisis response.**

Recommendations:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **CRISIS REPONSE ACTIVITIES CHECKLIST** | **Yes** | **No** | **N/A** |
| **INITIAL CONTACT** |  |  |  |
| Was the school’s phone tree activated? |  |  |  |
| Was the staff informed via e-mail? |  |  |  |
| **1ST MEETING- CRISIS PLANNING/ PREPARENESS** |  |  |  |
| Was a Crisis Team planning meeting conducted first thing in the morning? |  |  |  |
| Did the Crisis Intervention Department provide the school with a sample script and a sample letter?  |  |  |  |
| Was a script prepared and distributed to all staff members? |  |  |  |
| Did a Team member reach out to the family to offer support? |  |  |  |
| Did the Team identify an overflow room and determine who would maintain coverage throughout the day? |  |  |  |
| Did the Team determine who would be following the deceased student or staff member’s schedule? |  |  |  |
| Did the Team identify particular students or groups of students who would be affected most due to physical/emotional proximity? (Witnesses, siblings, relatives, friends, etc.) |  |  |  |
| Was an all-staff meeting conducted to explain when to read the script and where support/counseling can be attained for staff and students? |  |  |  |
| Was the School Security Officer(s) informed where to escort students demonstrating a strong emotional reaction to the incident? |  |  |  |
| Did the Team members receive Kleenex and art supplies to help students express their emotions and feelings?  |  |  |  |
| Was the Response Team prepared for students prior to their arrival? |  |  |  |
| **CRISIS RESPONSE AND MANAGEMENT** |  |  |  |
| Were the previously identified students or groups of students escorted to the overflow room upon arrival? |  |  |  |
| Were psycho educational groups conducted in the classrooms as needed? |  |  |  |
| Were students escorted/referred to the overflow room for individual and small group counseling? |  |  |  |
| Did the referred students sign-in once in the overflow room to document affected students for follow-up? |  |  |  |
| Were students throughout the school allowed to make cards or write letters for the deceased student/staff member? |  |  |  |
| **2ND DEBRIEF MEETING- ASSESSMENT OF NEEDS AND FOLLOW UP OF TARGETED INDIVIDUALS** |  |  |  |
| Was a mid-day Crisis Team meeting conducted to evaluate the response and determine what level of support is still needed? |  |  |  |
| Were additional classrooms identified that needed a psycho educational group to be conducted? |  |  |  |
| Did the Team follow-up with the teachers of the affected classrooms to ensure that the class has stabilized? |  |  |  |
| Did the Team create a letter to be sent home with the students and distribute it to the classroom teachers? |  |  |  |
| **CLOSING MEETING: EVALUATION AND OUT/ IN SCHOOL REFERRALS** |  |  |  |
| Did the Crisis Team conduct a closing meeting and evaluate the response? |  |  |  |
| Did the Team determine which staff members would follow-up with identified students from the overflow room? |  |  |  |
| Did the Team identify local community mental health agencies for long-term support? |  |  |  |
| Has the school identified staff members to attend the funeral and provide support to student’s at the funeral? |  |  |  |
| Has the school determined the guidelines for allowing students and staff to attend the funeral if they are during the school day? |  |  |  |
| Did the Team prepare for any long-term reminders? (birthday, graduation, etc.) |  |  |  |

**Crisis Intervention**

**Staff Sign in Sheet**

School:

Date:

Name: Time:

1. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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6.\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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10. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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**Crisis Intervention**

**Student Sign in Sheet**

School:

Date:

Name: Division Number: Period:

1. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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**Handouts**

* Handouts such as “Helping Children Cope with Loss, Death, and Grief: Tips for Parents and Teachers (page 25-28) can be helpful in the Crisis Response.
* Handouts can be distributed to teachers and staff and/or sent home with the letter to parents/guardians.
* You are encouraged to find other handouts/resources appropriate to your school and have them on hand in the event that you have a crisis situation at your school.

 **Helping Children Cope With Loss,**

**Death, and Grief**

**Tips for Teachers and Parents**

Schools and communities around the country will be impacted by the loss of life associated with the war in Iraq. The effects may be significant for some people because of their emotional closeness to the war and/or their concern over terrorism. How school personnel handle the resulting distress can help shape the immediate and longer-term grieving process for students, staff, and families. Children, in particular, will need the love and support of their teachers and parents to cope with their loss and reach constructive grief resolution.

# **Expressions of Grief**

Talking to children about death must be geared to their developmental level, respectful of their cultural norms, and sensitive to their capacity to understand the situation. Children will be aware of the reactions of significant adults as they interpret and react to information about death and tragedy. In fact, for primary grade children adult reactions will play an especially important role in shaping their perceptions of the situation. The range of reactions that children display in response to the death of significant others may include:

• ***Emotional shock*** and at times an apparent lack of feelings, which serve to help the child detach from the pain of the moment;

• ***Regressive (immature) behaviors***, such as needing to be rocked or held, difficulty separating from parents or significant others, needing to sleep in parent’s bed or an apparent difficulty completing tasks well within the child’s ability level;

• ***Explosive emotions and acting out behavior*** that reflect the child’s internal feelings of anger, terror, frustration and helplessness. Acting out may reflect insecurity and a way to seek control over a situation for which they have little or no control;

• ***Asking the same questions over and over***, not because they do not understand the facts, but rather because the information is so hard to believe or accept. Repeated questions can help listeners determine if the child is responding to misinformation or the real trauma of the event.

**Helping Children Cope**

The following tips will help teachers, parents, and other caregivers support children who have experienced the loss of parents, friends, or loved ones. Some of these recommendations come from Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado.

• ***Allow children to be the teachers about their grief experiences***: Give children the opportunity to tell their story and be a good listener.

• ***Don’t assume that every child in a certain age group understands death in the same way or with the same feelings*:** All children are different and their view of the world is unique and shaped by different experiences. (Developmental information is provided below.)

• ***Grieving is a process, not an event***: Parents and schools need to allow adequate time for each child to grieve in the manner that works for that child. Pressing children to resume “normal” activities without the chance to deal with their emotional pain may prompt additional problems or negative reactions.

• ***Don’t lie or tell half-truths to children about the tragic event:*** Children are often bright and sensitive. They will see through false information and wonder why you do not trust them with the truth. Lies do not help the child through the healing process or help develop effective coping strategies for life’s future tragedies or losses.

• ***Help all children, regardless of age, to understand loss and death****:* Give the child information at the level that he/she can understand. Allow the child to guide adults as to the need for more information or clarification of the information presented. Loss and death are both part of the cycle of life that children need to understand.

• ***Encourage children to ask questions about loss and death***: Adults need to be less anxious about not knowing all the answers. Treat questions with respect and a willingness to help the child find his or her own answers.

• ***Don’t assume that children always grieve in an orderly or predictable way****:* We all grieve in different ways and there is no one “correct” way for people to move through the grieving process.

• ***Let children know that you really want to understand what they are feeling or what they need****:* Sometimes children are upset but they cannot tell you what will be helpful. Giving them the time and encouragement to share their feelings with you may enable them to sort out their feelings.

• ***Children will need long-lasting support***: The more losses the child or adolescent suffers, the more difficult it will be to recover. This is especially true if they have lost a parent who was their major source of support. Try to develop multiple supports for children who suffer significant losses.

• ***Keep in mind that grief work is hard***: It is hard work for adults and hard for children as well.

• ***Understand that grief work is complicated***: Deaths that result from a terrorist act or war can brings forth many issues that are difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend. Grieving may also be complicated by a need for vengeance or justice and by the lack of resolution of the current situation: the conflict may continue and the nation may still feel at risk. The sudden or violent nature of the death or the fact that some individuals may be considered missing rather than dead can further complicate the grieving process.

• ***Be aware of your own need to grieve*:** Focusing on the children in your care is important, but not at the expense of your emotional needs. Adults who have lost a loved one will be far more able to help children work through their grief if they get help themselves. For some families, it may be important to seek family grief counseling, as well as individual sources of support.

# **Developmental Phases in Understanding Death**

It is important to recognize that all children are unique in their understanding of death and dying. This understanding depends on their developmental level, cognitive skills, personality characteristics, religious or spiritual beliefs, teachings by parents and significant others, input from the media, and previous experiences with death. Nonetheless, there are some general considerations that will be helpful in understanding how children and adolescents experience and deal with death.

• ***Infants and Toddlers***: The youngest children may perceive that adults are sad, but have no real understanding of the meaning or significance of death.

• ***Preschoolers***: Young children may deny death as a formal event and may see death as reversible. They may interpret death as a separation, not a permanent condition. Preschool and even early elementary children may link certain events and magical thinking with the causes of death. For instance, as a result of the World Trade Center disaster, some children may imagine that going into tall buildings may cause someone’s death.

• ***Early Elementary School***: Children at this age (approximately 5-9) start to comprehend the finality of death. They begin to understand that certain circumstances may result in death. They can see that, if large planes crash into buildings, people in the planes and buildings will be killed. In case of war images, young children may not be able to differentiate between what they see on television, and what might happen in their own neighborhood. However, they may over-generalize, particularly at ages 5-6—if jet planes don’t fly, then people don’t die. At this age, death is perceived as something that happens to others, not to oneself or one’s family.

• ***Middle School***: Children at this level have the cognitive understanding to comprehend death as a final event that results in the cessation of all bodily functions. They may not fully grasp the abstract concepts discussed by adults or on the TV news but are likely to be guided in their thinking by a concrete understanding of justice. They may experience a variety of feelings and emotions, and their expressions may include acting out or self-injurious behaviors as a means of coping with their anger, vengeance and despair.

• ***High School***: Most teens will fully grasp the meaning of death in circumstances such as an automobile accident, illness and even the World Trade Center or Pentagon disasters. They may seek out friends and family for comfort or they may withdraw to deal with their grief. Teens (as well as some younger children) with a history of depression, suicidal behavior and chemical dependency are at particular risk for prolonged and serious grief reactions and may need more careful attention from home and school during these difficult times.

# **Tips for Children and Teens with Grieving Friends and Classmates**

Seeing a friend try to cope with a loss may scare or upset children who have had little or no experience with death and grieving. Following are some suggestions teachers and parents can provide to children and youth to deal with this “secondary” loss.

• Particularly with younger children, it will be important to help clarify their understanding of death. See tips above under “helping children cope.”

• Seeing their classmates’ reactions to loss may bring about some fears of losing their own parents or siblings, particularly for students who have family in the military or other risk related professions. Children need reassurance from caregivers and teachers that their own families are safe. For children who have experienced their own loss (previous death of a parent, grandparent, sibling), observing the grief of a friend can bring back painful memories. These children are at greater risk for developing more serious stress reactions and should be given extra support as needed.

• Children (and many adults) need help in communicating condolence or comfort messages. Provide children with age-appropriate guidance for supporting their peers. Help them decide what to say (e.g., “Steve, I am so sorry about your father. I know you will miss him very much. Let me know if I can help you with your paper route….”) and what to expect (see “expressions of grief” above).

• Help children anticipate some changes in friends’ behavior. It is important that children understand that their grieving friends may act differently, may withdraw from their friends for a while, might seem angry or very sad, etc., but that this does not mean a lasting change in their relationship.

• Explain to children that their “regular” friendship may be an important source of support for friends and classmates. Even normal social activities such as inviting a friend over to play, going to the park, playing sports, watching a movie, or a trip to the mall may offer a much needed distraction and sense of connection and normalcy.

• Children need to have some options for providing support—it will help them deal with their fears and concerns if they have some concrete actions that they can take to help. Suggest making cards, drawings, helping with chores or homework, etc. Older teens might offer to help the family with some shopping, cleaning, errands, etc., or with babysitting for younger children.

• Encourage children who are worried about a friend to talk to a caring adult. This can help alleviate their own concern or potential sense of responsibility for making their friend feel better. Children may also share important information about a friend who is at risk of more serious grief reactions.

• Parents and teachers need to be alert to children in their care who may be reacting to a friend’s loss of a loved one. These children will need some extra support to help them deal with the sense of frustration and helplessness that many people are feeling at this time.

# **Resources for Grieving and Traumatized Children**

At times of severe stress, such as the trauma of war or terrorist attacks, both children and adults need extra support. Children who are physically and emotionally closest to this tragedy may very well experience the most dramatic feelings of fear, anxiety and loss. They may have personally lost a loved one or know of friends and schoolmates who have been devastated by these treacherous acts. Adults need to carefully observe these children for signs of traumatic stress, depression or even suicidal thinking, and seek professional help when necessary.

Resources to help you identify symptoms of severe stress and grief reactions are available at the National Association of School Psychologist’s website— *www.nasponline.org.* See also:

## ***For Caregivers***

• Deaton, R.L. & Berkan, W.A. (1995). *Planning and managing death issues in the schools: A handbook.* Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.

• Mister Rogers Website: *www.misterrogers.org* (see booklet on Grieving for children 4-10 years)

• Webb, N.B. (1993). *Helping bereaved children: A handbook for practitioners*. New York: Guilford Press.

• Wolfelt, A. (1983). *Helping children cope with grief*. Bristol, PA: Accelerated Development.

• Wolfelt, A (1997). *Healing the bereaved child: Grief gardening, growth through grief and other touchstones for caregivers*. Ft. Collins, CO: Companion.

• Worden, J.W. (1996). *Children and grief: When a parent dies.* New York: Guilford Press

• Helping Children Cope With Death, The Dougy Center for Grieving Children, www.dougy.org.

***For Children***

• Gootman, M.E. (1994). *When a friend dies: A book for teens about grieving and healing*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing.

• Greenlee, S. (1992). *When someone dies.* Atlanta: Peachtree Publishing. (Ages 9-12).

• Wolfelt, A. (2001). *Healing your grieving heart for kids*. Ft. Collins, CO: Companion. (See also similar titles for teens and adults)

*Adapted from material first posted on the NASP website after September 11, 2001.*

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