



EAST Grand Rapids Public Schools

Special Education Department

Guidelines for Dealing with Grief and Loss

March 22, 2012

Some general guidelines for dealing with grief questions, specifically regarding the death of a parent:

Kids will want to say something to the students whose parent has died upon their return. Let them know it is okay to say things like "I'm sorry about your Mom", "I was thinking about you" or "I'm glad your back". Even simple gesturing like offering a hug, high five or handshake can be reassuring as well as a simple "hi". Moderation is really the key here. Make sure the students understand the importance of resisting a "mob" mentality when the students return. They will likely welcome the reassurance of friends, but having everyone reach out to them all at once might be too much. Have the students pace themselves.

Keep in mind the students will want to get back to normal things as quickly as possible. School is one of the first opportunities to achieve that. It's okay for students to engage with the students whose parent has died as they always did. If they regularly played or ate lunch with the students, that should continue as well.

When dealing with questions from children, make sure to answer the question. Kids will often ask only those questions for which they need an answer. Choosing not to answer a question often results in the student creating the answer for themselves. As much as we foster the use of imagination, in these types of circumstances, it can be a detriment. We also need to be aware of providing too much information. Oftentimes, we over-answer or over-predict where a child is going with their question and end up providing far too many details.

In the case of illness, discuss the fact that the parent who died was very, very, very sick. Not all children, but some, will attribute any level of sickness to the possibility of death. You may also have children (younger) who believe that an event like this is contagious. Make sure to assure them this is not the case.

It's okay to use words like "death" and "died" when speaking to children. When using other phrasing like "he passed" or "they went on" it can sometimes be confusing for children. In many cases it is harder for the adults to say than the children to hear.

Be aware that death can trigger lots of different memories and personalizations for each of us. Many children and adults re-experience past feelings of loss when a new event occurs.

If there are other questions which arise regarding dealing with grief and loss, feel free to contact one of our school social workers:

Stephene Diepstra
Chris Kenward
Steve Seth
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