

# Tips for Talking with Children about Death

## Wichita Public Schools ~ Student Support Services

- A child's initial focus may be the specific details of the death rather than any feelings about the person's death. It is appropriate to discuss some memories about the person who died and ask the child to do the same. Some children may appear to just be stunned in light of the news.
- Some children may focus on their own personal losses. Sometimes children are reluctant to talk about their feelings because they are fearful that no one else feels the way they do. We can model how to begin to handle life's losses by honestly discussing how we feel with them.
- Children can feel very anxious after learning about a death of someone they knew. Because children are so dependent on their own families and siblings, they may worry about what would happen to them if it had been their parent or sibling who died.
- When talking with children about death it is important to tell the truth but in a way that is developmentally appropriate. They may ask repeatedly about how and when the person died.
- Avoid giving unnecessary information that would only serve to distress or confuse a child. Avoid creating mental images of frightening or horrifying sights. Also, dispel any 'Halloween-type' myths or rumors which are common.
- Children think very concretely, and therefore, require straight facts. Hearing the truth can help squelch any rumors/gossip. They may need to be told more than once what happened.
- Allow for ventilation and discussion. After telling a child about a death, set aside some time for them to share their feelings about the person's death. Expect that some children will bring up other losses and painful experiences that they have had. It is important to allow them to share but also to not get too far off track.
- Answer questions that arise as truthfully as you can. It is appropriate to answer questions about things like "Is he/she in heaven now?" or other religious questions by saying something non-denominational like: "Everyone has different ideas and beliefs about what happens when we die. We don't really know what his/her family believe. But he/she was a good person".
- Affirm all expressions. Children respond in very different ways to loss. Some children may be deeply affected while others appear unmoved. Additionally, children generally are not very skilled at handling strong negative news and the feelings that can accompany it, so they may react with laughter or nervousness, or some other way that may appear inappropriate to adults. This is normal.
- It is often helpful for children to process their feelings through an art or writing project once they have had a chance to discuss the death.
- Allow time for the child to process the news and then try to resume normal activities. Children grieve intermittently and will not be able to focus upon their grieving for extended periods of time.
- Some children may ask about the funeral and whether they can attend. The school district allows students to attend funerals only if their parent attends with them and provides for their transportation. If children will be attending the funeral, it is important to discuss with them what to expect at a funeral setting. It is also important to be aware that children returning from the funeral may need to talk with someone before going back into the classroom.
- As stated earlier, some children will not react during the first few days. We need to be aware that long term affects may result from an unexpected death. Increased aggression, withdrawal, risk-taking, regression, sadness, and dramatic changes in behavior or academics may be signs of emotional trouble that should be addressed.