Advice on loss of a student

Counselortalk January 2017

When we had a student death in our elem it was important to allow the class to do something to help. We let them all make cards to send to the family. Allow them time to be sad. Provide support for the teacher as it will be very hard on the classroom teacher.

I’ve learned it’s very important to coach the staff on how they can answer questions and support the other students. What have the parents given permission to share? What do they prefer to refrain from?--

We have had I-CART come help us through such situations, and they are very helpful - I urge you to have them or a similar group of professionals come and at least advise you on what to say to the kids...they will meet with kids individually or in groups, too.  They are trained, experienced professionals who are extremely helpful.  I wish you all the best.  [i-cart.org](http://i-cart.org)

I would go into each classroom and do a small group with the kids to talk about what happened, their feelings and what we can do to support the family. One of the things we did was give each student a piece of paper and have them draw or write a memory of the student. We bound it together and gave it to the family at the visitation. Of course, I would make sure all the entries are appropriate. I would explain to the kids that often we feel so helpless when something like this happens but this is one thing we can do to help.

I attended a conference session on this back in the fall, so I’ll try to recall the highlights:

         Draft ONE single statement, including only information the family is comfortable with you sharing, and then use that same statement to inform the teachers, the students, the parents, etc.  Also, have something prepared in case the media contact you for any reason.

         As for any type of memorial, if you do something, make sure it is something you could do with anyone.  The presenters actually discouraged any type of living memorial (tree, plant, etc.), because it could be hard to do for everyone; if it dies, that could be traumatizing; etc.  They actually suggested allowing temporary memorials (cards, letters, etc), with a definitive start and end date (ie:  the memorial will continue to be on display until \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ date).  That way, everyone knows that it was always the plan to take it down/clean it up on that date, and it’s not just that people are “over it.”  They also said memorials that are displayed forever can be difficult for the families to see every time they’re in the building.

         Make sure someone (maybe the admin assistant) is available to take calls on the matter and is prepared to give the statement you drafted.

·         Make sure the students know that counseling is available, but don’t force it, either.  Have professionals (yourself, clergymen/women, outside mental health agency, etc.) available for both individual and group counseling.  In the group settings, try to have at least 2 adult facilitators—1 to “lead” the group (although it should be more student-driven), and 1 to act as the comforter (goes around handing out tissues if needed, gives a pat on the shoulder, etc.)  This second person can also take someone out if they need to leave the group and talk 1:1.

Call Erin's House for Grieving Children located in Fort Wayne, IN. They do in school services for free and can help immediately! They are AMAZING

Give students info on what happened.

2. Allow kids to share feelings and thoughts.

3.Create atmosphere in class to make cards for family.

4. Send info home to parents about death, importance of talking to kids.

5.Share info about arrangements and school policy about attendance for funeral.

6. Leave empty desk for the week.

We just had this happen on Friday. We sent a phone call home to all parents letting them know that a student has died (with the deceased student’s parents’ permission) and to talk with their kids about it. Then, today we read short script to all students telling them about the student the passed away and offered counseling, if needed. Also, we are providing a time today for students to make cards for the family. As well, we will have dress up days in honor of him this week. For example, today was wear blue (his favorite color). Tomorrow will be super hero day.

Give them a way to help.  Kids like to feel like they can contribute in some way.  I had our students make tissue paper flowers with pipe cleaners and different colors of tissue paper.  Then we gathered them all up into bouquets and displayed them at the funeral.  The family will appreciate it and so will the kids.

Julia Cook's 'Grief is Like a Snowflake' is specifically about the loss of a parent but it teaches young children about the grief process and helps with healing and understanding.

I have also attached a letter that I modified from Julie Baumgart.  With this letter, I also attached a print-out from I-cart.org about how children grieve and how parents can respond.  We sent a second letter home with the funeral information.  We had parent permission to do all of this.  Also, the first day, our principal sent an alert call to the parents of the students in the deceased student's classroom shortly before dismissal, so they could be prepared.  I also did a short lesson about what to expect and what to say if they attended the funeral.

I would also encourage you to attend the funeral if you can.  There were several items from school displayed at the funeral--his awards, his school work, and the cards that his classmates had made for the family.

I really like he book Quilly's sideways grief. It is a cute way to talk about grief that the kids relate to. It has activities in the back of the book too.

I also have had some friends who had success working with Gilda’s Club—you might check that out.

Our local HOSPICE has a person who comes to our building and conducts grief groups.

Hello! I downloaded a curriculum from TPT that is centered around the Inside Out movie. So far, it has been working well and the kids have liked it. We are halfway through and they have enjoyed everything.