

Helping Young Children Cope with Tragic Death

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The sudden death of a teacher always shocks a community. Most people feel a mix of disbelief and profound sorrow. How could this happen, we wonder. It's so unfair. And adults feel concern for children. Parents want to be helpful but also have to manage their own reactions. They may find themselves remembering other traumatic deaths among their family and friends. They can worry about saying too much or too little, about not having enough information, about saying the wrong thing. Though there is no perfect approach, here are points to keep in mind when dealing with young children about this:

1. Don't assume that your child feels what you feel. Most young children aren't aware of important events around them and are focused on their magical worlds of play and fun. Many may not become aware of the tragedy, and those who do may show little reaction. This does not mean a child is hiding his or her feelings, is in denial, or has some sort of problem.

2. Young children are remarkably resilient. If they become aware, they may be upset, but given a chance to express what they feel, they usually recover quickly. It almost never helps to keep asking them extensive, probing questions. It does help to give them simple, direct information, to respond to their questions, and to offer appropriate reassurance.

3. If you're not sure how to answer any sort of question your child has, it is often helpful to inquire further. You can say, "What made you think of that?" or "Can you tell me what you were thinking about?" A better understanding of these issues will make it easier for you to respond.

4. You needn't be perfect. If the tragedy comes into your child's awareness, you might become emotional. They may observe you being emotional even if they don't know why. If you are sad or even tearful around your children, this is fine. It is often very helpful for children to see their parents expressing and dealing with strong feelings. It's OK for them to see that you are feeling sad about a grown-up thing, and then to see you are able to feel better.

In the end, parents will rarely go wrong by relying on what is most basic between them and their children—caring and connection. At these times, your presence—just being with the kids, just being available to them, listening to them, sharing with them—can really help them cope.

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