

Class Discussion Format

I. AFTER A CRITICAL INCIDENT

Guidelines for managing a class discussion after the initial notification of a death or serious injury.

A. Rationale

- Students benefit from modelling of healthy ways to express sorrow and respond to loss
- Children cannot be insulated from the realities of death; the attempt to do so can prevent students from developing positive coping behaviours
- Sharing feelings and experiences can help our students feel less helpless and alone
- A teacher's expression of sorrow conveys that strong emotions are natural and do not need to be hidden

B. General Guidelines

1. **Acknowledge the reality of the tragedy and your willingness to talk about it.**
2. **Be simple and straightforward, using terms students can easily understand.**
3. **Express your own feelings in an open and calm way.**
4. **Provide opportunities for students to share their feelings but do not pressure them to do so.**
5. **Project confidence and reassurance; listen without judgment.**
6. **Be patient – repeated questions and stories are a natural part of making sense of loss.**
7. **Assess the meaning of the loss for each student and monitor accordingly.**
 - Students who have experienced other significant losses
 - Students who had negative experiences with the person who died
 - Students who have a history of trauma
8. **Be prepared for an increase of fears, anxieties and physical complaints.**
9. **Assess the needs of the majority of your students in determining discussion length.**
10. **Refer students in need of extra support.**
 - Support Room
 - Counselling
 - Follow up with parents

Using Sensitive Language: Statements to Avoid

Instead of...	Say...
<i>passed away, gone</i>	<i>died</i>
<i>If you need anything, let me know</i>	<i>Would it help if I...?</i>
<i>I know just how you feel</i>	<i>You must be having a lot of feelings right now</i>
<i>murdered</i>	<i>died</i>



Class Discussion Format, continued

C. Beginning the Discussion

1. Read the written statement provided by your Principal.
2. If, for some reason, you have not received a written statement to read, here is an example of what you might say, with adaptations age and specific situation:
 - “Something very sad has happened. _____, a Grade ____ student, has died (in the hospital, in a car accident, etc.). This kind of sad news is hard to accept. You will probably have many feelings in the next while. You could be sad, angry, confused, depressed, afraid, or have no feeling at all for some time. When I've felt like this, it has helped me to talk to someone. Sharing my feelings made it easier, although not less painful, to deal with the tragedy. If you'd like to talk about the situation, I'd be glad to take time to do that. I'll try to answer any questions as well as I can.”
3. Open a discussion by asking what they've already heard, clarifying facts as necessary.
4. Encourage children to share memories of their classmate or teacher, “What are some of the things you want to remember about _____?”

D. During the Discussion

Responding to Student
Comments and Questions

1. Acknowledge that a wide variety of feelings is normal; there is no one right way to react to death.
Feelings will vary from student to student and will change over time.
Sample Statements:
 - It's okay to forget _____ (name) sometimes when you work and play.
 - Some of you feel angry that _____ died. What can you do with your angry feelings?
 - It's okay that some of you are very sad and some are only a little sad.
 - Because _____ died, you may be reminded of others that you cared for who have died.
 - It's okay to cry - it's all right. It's also okay not to cry.
2. Acknowledge that you don't possess all the answers. Often there is more comfort from an honest, I don't know why, than from an attempt at explanations that don't sound credible.
3. Acknowledge the various cultural, religious, or family beliefs that may be expressed.
4. Be sensitive about the language you use
 - To avoid confusion, say died instead of passed away or gone
 - When acknowledging feelings, say You must be having a lot of feelings right now..., instead of I know just how you feel.
 - Avoid judging or blaming
 - Avoid frightening or sensational language such as murder; use died instead



Class Discussion Format, continued

E. Concluding the Discussion

1. Focus on comforts and strengths students have:

- The support that comes from sharing grief or fear with others
- Counsellors and other trusted adults at school
- A support network
 - Invite each student to think of someone they can go to for support
- Their individual strengths

2. Talk about the natural healing process in a sensitive manner, if appropriate.

- Use discretion on whether this discussion should be saved for later, as it can be perceived as trivializing the loss.
- Sample Statement: It's hard to believe now, but over time the pain of missing _____ won't hurt quite so much. That's the way it should be – your mind and heart will learn to live with it. This doesn't mean that you love _____ any less, or that they weren't important to you.

3. Wrap up the discussion while making it clear that there will be other opportunities to talk about it if needed.

- Sample Statement: Class is almost over, and it seems we have more to talk about. Perhaps we can set aside some time tomorrow.

4. Remind students about the supports available.

5. Channel feelings into tangible expressions of support for the family.

(Be sure to make this optional so that students do not feel any pressure.)

- Cards, notes, pictures
- Memory book
- Prayers
- Providing food, doing yard work, running errands



Class Discussion Format, continued

II. IN CASE OF A COMPLETED SUICIDE: SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSIONS

A. Rationale

- Most students over eight years of age are old enough to understand the act of suicide
- Children and teens sometimes have romantic fantasies about death which should not be encouraged
- Students benefit from hearing basic facts without unnecessary details
- Death by suicide often brings intense feelings of fear, anger, betrayal and guilt
- o Students need to have these feelings named and validated

B. General Guidelines

- 1. If the family has agreed that the death was a suicide, it is appropriate to use this term**
- 2. Communicate basic facts without dwelling on details**
 - Acknowledge that we might have questions about the details but that often we will not ever know the answers
 - Remind students of the importance of not believing everything they hear, as it is common for there to be rumours and misinformation circulation
- 3. Validate feelings and questions**
 - Fear, anger, betrayal and guilt are natural responses; students need to hear this more than once in the days that follow
- 4. Stress the importance of not feeling responsible**
 - Acknowledge that often after a suicide, people close the person who died can blame themselves
 - Stress that even if you had conflict with the person who died, their death is not your fault
- 5. Discuss alternatives to suicide**
 - Stress that even if someone feels there is no way out, there are better options
 - List specific options and how they can be accessed
- 6. Remind students of the importance of talking to someone when they feel despondent**
 - List suggestions as a class
 - Ask each individual student to privately think of the people they would turn to

