

## CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND TRAUMATIC LOSS

### SUGGESTIONS AND GUIDELINES

Children are exposed to both public losses in their communities and very private losses in their own families. The recent loss in your school is a painful experience for all members of the school community, especially children. There is no doubt that this will be a topic of discussion in the days, weeks and even months ahead. We would like to offer some suggestions for you and your children.

- Talking to children is very useful as they work through the feelings they have at these critical times. It is best for discussions to occur spontaneously in safe settings with family members.
  - Topics may include grief and sadness, courage and compassion.
  - Correct any misinformation and encourage and facilitate expression of feelings but also to let students know that it is okay not to talk.
  - Adults and children search for answers and while there may be no answers at this time (or in the future) children can be assured that such events are very very rare.
  - Focus on those who help: first responders, parents, community members, clergy, etc. Children need to know that there are many many adults who help all of us, at all times.
- Pre-schoolers and primary graders may regress and/or re-enact a traumatic situation. This doesn't mean that they are insensitive; rather it is an attempt at mastery of this new and frightening information.
- Some children and families may have had recent losses; this new tragedy may reawaken earlier feelings of grief and loss.
- It is often helpful for children to show their compassion by writing letters or send condolence cards to families. Encourage them to not only create their own cards, but think of other ways to show a family that they are thinking of them.
- Perhaps a parent's greatest frustration is not knowing exactly what to do or say at times of loss and death.. Remember that everyone is feeling the pain of the loss and emotions will be "close to the surface." Be sure to use your own support system.
- Once again, the family and the school community are being challenged to provide an island of support and stability in the aftermath of a tragic loss. The attachment we have to each other through family and community is key to mitigating the untoward effects of tragedy.
- Traumatic life events overwhelm a person's psychological systems that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning. The limited cognitive and life experiences of children make them especially vulnerable. This is particularly relevant given the repeated exposure to anxiety producing events in today's world.
  - Help children by demonstrating faith in the resiliency of the human spirit.
  - Encourage children to talk about their feelings and validate their reactions.
  - Clarify information in order to dispel misconceptions, which will vary according to each child's developmental stage.
  - Recognize the impact of media (TV, radio, internet, newspaper) on children. Provide an opportunity for children to discuss what they have seen or read.
  - Limit children's exposure to media as a way of lessening its impact.
  - Maintain structure and normal routine to increase feelings of safety and security.
  - Foster recreational activities as a physical and emotional outlet. Just as adults can benefit from doing concrete activities to help themselves through anxiety and grief, children also need to make specific contributions to lessen their anxiety and to express their compassion and sadness.