



UBHC

UNIVERSITY BEHAVIORAL HEALTHCARE

Traumatic Loss Coalitions for Youth

# HELPING CHILDREN

## Following a Sudden Traumatic Death

A sudden, traumatic death of a member of a school community is shocking and unbelievable. This is especially true when the victim is a child.

A sudden and traumatic death of a peer disrupts the way children see the world. Most children see threat as minimal, and they see the world as a safe and meaningful place. Subsequently, they feel a sense of control over their environment. When a traumatic death happens, threat becomes high and children can feel out of control, unsafe and that the world has lost its meaning. Children can begin to worry that dangerous things can befall them or those they love.

Parents and school personnel can be helpful in mitigating the emotional effects of these events on children. Below are some strategies for dealing with a traumatic and accidental death and assisting children in regaining their sense of safety and security.

- **Tell your child about the tragedy as soon as possible after it happens**
  - Children can manage upsetting news when it is told to them by the people that know them best and love them the most
  - Talk to your child in age appropriate language without giving them more information than they need or are asking for
  - Refrain from sharing graphic and disturbing information about the death or the condition of the body
  - Children may ask if the decedent felt pain. An answer like “I think it happened very quickly and made \_\_\_\_ go unconscious so there was no pain.” can be very reassuring to children
- **Find out what concerns your child has and take them seriously**
  - Some fears may seem trivial to adults but can occupy the child’s thoughts and dreams just the same. It is important to take their concerns seriously and offer reassurance
  - You can ask children “After hearing about this tragedy what do you think most kids are worrying about?”
- **Tackle the tough questions**
  1. **Why did this have to happen to my friend?**
    - “These kinds of things are not fair and it shouldn’t have happened. I am so sorry your good friend died in this accident. No one your age should have to say goodbye to a friend.”
    - Refrain from telling your child that “God wanted \_\_\_\_ with him in heaven and so he came for him”. While it is important for you to communicate your beliefs about death and afterlife if that is part of your faith, these kinds of explanations can actually increase the anxiety of young children who take what adults say very literally. A child may hear that explanation and begin to worry that God will come for them or a loved one too
  2. **Could this happen to me or to people I care about?**
    - It is important for children to know that these kinds of tragedies are not that frequent
    - Talk with your child about how you take care to make sure that your family is safe
    - If the death was caused by an illness, explain that while it does happen, it is unusual for a child to die. Most people live to be very old
    - If the death was due to an illness your child may be afraid they or someone they love will get sick and die too. If there is not a contagious health concern, explain to your child that they don’t have the same condition that caused their peer to die. If there is risk of contagion, explain to your child what steps you are taking to make sure they stay well

- If the event was a car accident talk with your children about how careful you are when you drive and how you obey the law to make sure your driving is safe, including wearing a seat belt and not speeding. You must then be true to your word
- If the tragedy was a fire, talk to your children about the safeguards you have in your home such as smoke detectors and fire extinguishers. If you don't have these things in place it would be a good idea to purchase them to show your child how committed you are to safety
- Children are accustomed to having fire drills at school and would benefit from practicing a fire drill at home along with other safety activities like stop, drop, and roll
- Teach your children to dial 911 and what to say to report an emergency

All of these measures give children a greater sense of control, mastery, and safety, the things that are disrupted when there is a sudden, accidental death.

- **Keep the routine**
  - Routine provides us with a sense of security. The routine of school, after school activities and sports are important to mitigate the feeling that the 'world is out of control'
- **Spend time together as a family**
  - Increase opportunities for play, fun and relaxation. Connecting with friends and family members helps children feel there is a safety net of people around them
- **Allow time for extra comforting**
  - Children often need some additional time for soothing and comforting when they are dealing with upsetting circumstances. Extra hugs, cuddling, and story telling are helpful and relaxing.
  - After a traumatic incident, children may have nightmares. It might be helpful to allow the child to sleep in close proximity for a bit of time. Sleeping bags or cots could be used for a few nights.
  - If you find that your child is having difficulty staying in school because of anxiety, you may want to arrange with the counseling department to allow one phone call to you during lunch. Do all you can to help your child go to school and remain in school until the end of the day
- **Monitor the amount of TV watching**
  - Some events attract mass media attention. Frightening, dramatic and sad images are often repetitively displayed in newsprint, on television or radio. Watching these kinds of scenes may fixate the images of a violent or accidental death and increase the child's feelings of vulnerability. It is important to monitor what children are viewing and limit their exposure to upsetting media coverage
- **Monitor your child's behavior and seek assistance if necessary**
  - While the signs and symptoms below can be normal in the early days and weeks following a traumatic event, if they do not abate or they increase, additional help may be required. If you have concerns about your child, do not hesitate to contact your school's counseling department or your local community behavioral health center.
    - Somatic complaints (stomachaches, headaches and muscle pain)
    - Changes in behavior (increase in irritability, aggression, anger, or becoming more fearful and clinging)
    - Changes in school performance
    - Withdrawal from friends and family
    - Difficulty concentrating
    - Nightmares
    - Inability to stop thinking about the event
    - Refusing to attend school
    - Worrying excessively about something bad happening to them or someone they love
    - Play depicting the event that seems excessive and results in your child feeling more anxious or upset

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