

Outline for Letter to Parents

When your school suffers a loss, students are apt to talk about it when they get home. It is very helpful for parents to know basic information at times like these. Here are some items to cover in letters sent home:

- Begin with a statement of regret. "We had sad news at our school today."
- Tell basic facts about the tragedy. "We learned of the death of one of our students, _____, who was in _____'s _____ grade class. S/he died _____ (tell cause of death) _____ (when)."
- Give information about what the school did to help the kids process. "We had the help of our Crisis Response Team, who helped teachers announce the sad news with the students. They also staffed a room for students to go if they needed a little extra time for talking or processing." Go on to state any special measures, such as, "The paramedics who were on the scene came in to reassure students that everything that could have been done was tried, and that nothing could have saved _____'s life."
- If details of the family funeral or an in-school memory activity are known, give information about that. "The family funeral is at _____ o'clock on _____ at _____. Students who wish to attend will need bring a note of permission from a parent." Address transportation -- will the school provide or are parents needing to make those arrangements for their own children?
- Consider whether your students are young enough that adult supervision and support is advisable. If so, make the suggestion to parents that arrangements should be such that every three to five or so students needs to have an adult along.
 - Let parents know whether they are invited to attend the school activity .
- Let parents know who the school contact person is if they have questions.
- Include a section on how parents can support their kids:
 - This event might bring up questions, concerns or fears for your child.
 - Be sensitive about whether s/he is needing/wanting to talk.
 - Bring it up in case s/he is reluctant to do so.
 - Ask about his/her reactions to this, and **accept those feelings as stated!** Resist the temptation to minimize the pain, deny the feelings or give advice. **Simply listen!** Helpful responses on your part:
 - "Tell me more about that."
 - "Have you ever felt that way before?"
 - "I wonder if there are other things that are worrying you?"
 - Be concrete and brief in your answers, especially with younger children. Allow some silence and processing time after a statement.
 - **Do not compare death with sleep or any other state of consciousness.** Sleep is a regenerative process necessary to health. Death is the loss of all life and regenerative processes. Kids often end up sleep deprived because of fear that they'll die, too, if we use this comparison.
 - Allow for regressive behaviors. Kids might need to sleep close to an adult for awhile.
 - Be especially emotionally available and non judgmental.
 - Realize that kids move in and out of the grief process, but it is very intense for them when they're experiencing the sadness/anxiety/fear. Encourage them to go out and have fun, get noisy, be active, and celebrate life in what ever way they can. Those periods of reprieve are important in sustaining health and in recovery. Allow them to move in and out of grieving at their own pace.

- Remember the importance of humor, laughter, joking.
- Let parents know how they will get updated information, if appropriate.
- If you are going to have a parent meeting (which is especially helpful in cases of suicide, murder, missing kids or other traumatic events) put in the time and place of the meeting and who will be presiding/presenting.
- If there is something that parents are going to join in doing, such as a fund-raiser to help the family or organizing some effort on the family's behalf, give those details.
- Other special issues, as dictated by the uniqueness of the circumstance.

If you anticipate many calls, or if the crisis is such that details will be unfolding over time, consider putting an answering machine on one particular number or on the school line after hours. Let parents know that they can call this number for updates and that it will be kept current. Some schools have used the reader board to announce activities related to the tragedy. Use your judgment on this.

In cases where there has been a critical injury, consider coordinating with the hospital, asking them to keep you informed of the information that you can share with the school community. The hospital often appreciates the decrease in calls to them regarding patient condition and parents, staff and students appreciate access to changing information.

