#### A Script to Help Teachers Announce a Death to Their Students

Dear Staff:

This is a hard task - to tell your students about the death that has occurred.

FIRST AND FOREMOST: If you do not feel that you want to be the one to tell your students, then don’t. The School Level Crisis Team will make someone available to you who can lead the discussion for you, or take over your class while you seek the support you need. Please take advantage of this resource! We care about your needs in this sad time and want you to feel our support.

If you do want to lead the discussion, then here are the facts and some suggestions for procedures:

“I have something very sad I want to share with you.” Write here the factual information (agreed upon by the School Level Crisis Team) e.g.; “Joe Smith, a student who attends our school, who was missing, is dead. Yesterday, the police found the little boy’s body and he had been murdered. The police are investigating the crime and will give us the information they can as they make progress in finding the killer.”

Then offer some information about feelings:

“When things like this happen, people have all kinds of reactions: shock, sadness, fear, anger, or no feeling at all. These reactions can come and go in an hour, a day, or for days to come. Some of us will want to be private about our feelings; some of us will want to talk to people.”

Say a little about your feelings, for example:

“I am feeling very sad about what’s happened and a little scared, too. I would like to spend some time together now to share with each other. Maybe we could help each other in expressing how we feel about (name of the one who died) and how she/he died.”

* Take some time for discussion.
* Attached are handouts for your reference: Refer to “Teacher’s Guidelines on How to Lead a Discussion with Grieving Students”.
* After your discussion, tell the children that there are counselors in the building if they need to talk further and arrange with them a procedure for going to see the counselor or to the safe room.
* After your discussion you may want to:
  1. Take time for recess, playground play or standing and stretching in the classroom.
  2. Do some drawing, art project or other projects – leave the subject matter up to the student.
  3. Do some journal writing – write down thoughts about whatever is on the child’s mind.
  4. Go back to curriculum.
* It may be useful to continue these activities at intervals during the day and to intersperse them throughout your curriculum in the coming days.

If you need some support, please call the front office. Do not hesitate to ask.

**TEACHER GUIDELINES ON HOW TO LEAD A DISCUSSION WITH GRIEVING STUDENTS**

1. FACILITATE A DISCUSSION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE  
   Hold the talking circle as soon as possible after a crisis to avoid times of confusion and misinformation.
2. ASK FOR HELP (IF NEEDED)  
   You must be comfortable enough with the issues being discussed in order to lead the discussion. If you are not comfortable, ask for help from a counselor/School Level Crisis Team member.
3. FORM A CIRCLE  
   Forming a circle will include all members in a discussion. Move the desks, sit on a rug, etc.
4. CREATE A STRUCTURED OR UNSTRUCTURED CONVERSATION  
   A talking circle can be structured so that each student has an opportunity to speak in turn around the circle or the leader can facilitate an open, unstructured discussion. Younger students and students facing greater trauma are relieved by the more structured format.
5. OBSERVE THE "I PASS" RULE  
   In a structured talking circle, a child can choose not to share by saying "I pass.” This rule keeps the discussion safe for a student by honoring his/her own pace.
6. USE A "TALKING STICK"  
   In a structured talking circle, use a special object as your "talking stick" (a stuffed animal, a special rock, a wand). The one holding the object is the only one to speak.
7. TELL THE TRUTH  
   Use accurate information and appropriate words (i.e., died, murdered, suicide). If you don't know the answers to the student's questions, say so. Offer to find out answers and report back, if possible.
8. SHARE YOUR OWN FEELINGS  
   It is good modeling and greatly cherished by students if their teachers share honestly about their own feelings (tears are OK). Do not look to your students as your source of support, but show your students that you rely appropriately on your adult peers for emotional support.
9. SHARE FEELINGS AND MEMORIES IN THE GROUP
10. OFFER TIME FOR REFLECTION  
    Listen carefully when a student shares an experience and be willing to simply reflect their statements. This often gives the students a sense of what they are feeling and inspires them to proceed along their own direction at their own pace.
11. AVOID ASKING TOO MANY QUESTIONS  
    Questions can often generate a conversation in a more unstructured discussion but too many questions can lead the conversation in the direction of the facilitator's wants and needs rather than the student’s wants and needs.
12. AVOID INTERPRETATIONS  
    If a student is indirect or is using symbols in order to express him/herself, it is because direct communication is too painful. Communicate with a student through the information and the symbols that are offered.
13. AVOID JUDGEMENT  
    Referring to a student's sharing as either "good" or "bad" can encourage a student to seek adult approval while discouraging the student to trust his/her own way of expressing grief. You can say "thank you" for their sharing.
14. META COMMUNICATE WITH OTHER STAFF IN THE CIRCLE  
    Meta-communication is communication that takes place between the facilitators in a talking circle. This meta-level conversation is one that is meant to be "overheard" by the students and allows the facilitators a time of reflection with each other. Possible uses: highlighting important information shared, slowing down and processing a difficult interaction, giving emotional support to the process as a whole, or acknowledging our own feelings.
15. ALLOW FOR SILENCE AND TEARS  
    Often a little silence expresses the care that is needed and allows the one who is crying time to understand the meaning of the tears.
16. ALLOW FOR "MORBID CURIOSITY"  
    Curiosity about the explicit details of a death is healthy because students need to create a specific picture of what has happened before they can begin to feel what the death means to them. Encourage students in their exploration and answer their questions when you can.
17. ALLOW FOR SPECULATION  
    When students do not have the information they need to make the explicit pictures of what has happened, they will make up the missing pieces in their minds. Honor their speculations as their attempts to understand.
18. ALLOW FOR JOKING AND LAUGHTER  
    Sometimes students laugh when they are nervous and uncomfortable. We all do. Normalize this process for the students and find ways for the healthy release of laughter.
19. ENCOURAGE OTHER SUPPORT  
    As the group sharing is coming to a close, discuss with the students other ways they may get the support they need as they continue to grieve, i.e., a safe room or other adults in the school building, adults at home, friends, or resources in the community.
20. RECOGNIZE FEELINGS MAY CONTINUE  
    As the group sharing is coming to a close, inform students that they may continue to experience a wide range of feelings in the coming days/weeks/months. Feelings (anger, fear, numbness, happiness, guilt, regret, relief, etc.) are normal.
21. ESTABLISH CLOSURE  
    Express your appreciation for what has been shared and have a moment of acknowledgement for what the group may be going through.

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#### What to Say to Grieving Students

Both students and teachers can send a note before the student returns to school. “I’m sorry to hear that your mom died. I’m thinking about you and wanting to make your time at school the best it can be . . .”

Being a good listener is the best you can offer. Allow what you say to be an opener for the student to talk if she/he wants to. If she/he doesn’t want to talk, then remain available.

1. “I’m sorry that your mom died. I’m thinking about you.”
2. “I’m available at lunch time (be specific) if you want to talk or shoot some baskets.”
3. “When is your basketball game? Maybe I can stop by and watch you play.”
4. “I’d like to do something with you on Saturday. We can either talk about your mom if you’d like, or we can go roller-skating at the mall—both are ok with me” (as appropriate).
5. “I care about you.”
6. “I want to help in any way I can.” (Offer specific ideas: help with homework . . .)
7. “I am aware that today is your birthday/your mother’s birthday/Mothers’ Day/ the anniversary of the day your mother died. I’m thinking about you.”
8. “I can’t know how you feel, but I want to.”
9. Share your own losses briefly, and then listen: “I can’t know how you feel, but I did have my grandfather die . . . (share). What was it like for you?”
10. “If you want to talk, I want to listen. If you don’t want to talk, I’ll hang out with you.”
11. “If you don’t want to talk to other students, I’ll tell them about what happened to your mother.”
12. “Do you want a hug?”
13. “Do you have any pictures of your mom?”
14. “Don’t forget to continue to joke and crack-up. Laughter is food to help us endure.”
15. Teachers: Let’s talk about things we can do to make you feel more comfortable in class/school. Some ideas are included on the handout, “Things A Teacher Can Say or Do to Help a Grieving Student Returning to School.”

For the most part, it is important to say something to a grieving friend, even if it feels awkward. The reaching out is what is important.

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