

Helping Children Cope With Tragic Loss

Robert Evans, Ed.D

Tragic loss of any kind reverberates throughout a school and a community. Like everyone else, parents and teachers feel shock and disbelief, followed by immediate concern about those who have been hurt and killed—and then by concern about impact on their own children and students. All of us who are raising or working with children worry about helping them understand how such a thing could happen, especially when we ourselves cannot always make sense of it. We worry about saying too much or too little, about not having enough information, about saying the wrong thing. Though there is no perfect solution, there are five guidelines that can often make a positive difference in talking with children.

1. It is helpful not to over-assume what the tragedy means to children. They react differently depending on their age, their closeness to the situation, their own personalities, what they hear or are told, and their family's pattern of communication. Some may be deeply moved, others less so. Some may have many questions, others fewer. Not all will be intensely affected. Showing little reaction does not automatically mean a student is hiding or denying his or her feelings.
2. Young people are remarkably resilient. They may become upset, but given a chance to express what they feel, they usually resume their normal lives—and often do so more rapidly than we adults. Tragic deaths can actually hit adults harder than they do teenagers or young children. Most young people do not benefit from extensive, probing adult-led questioning about their reactions. They do profit from simple, direct information and from adults being available to respond to their questions and to listen when they themselves want to talk. Very young children in particular are not helped by extensive discussion of events that may barely have registered on them.
3. If you receive challenging questions from children it can be useful to understand these before answering them. Often a request for information

is spurred not only by curiosity, but by feeling. Usually, the child already has some idea about this. We may be more helpful if, rather than plunging into an immediate answer, we learn what motivates the question. This is particularly true if the question is a difficult one. Parents can say, “What made you think of that?” or “Can you tell me what you were thinking about?” Also, it can be good to ask, “What ideas do you have?” Once you know the meaning of the question, it is easier to answer effectively.

4. There may be questions we cannot answer, which can make us feel inadequate. But children and teenagers are typically more comforted by straight talk than by false assurances. Rather than to invent a response, it can be much more helpful to say, “I don’t know,” or, “I’ll try to find out.”
5. Coping with a tragedy is not primarily a matter of technique and is not something best handled by a “strategy” that deviates sharply from a family’s or a school’s familiar patterns of communication. The routines of school, for example, are, all by themselves, a source of comforting continuity and assurance. Parents and teachers both will rarely go wrong by relying on what is most basic between them and children—caring and connection. At these times, even if everyone feels deeply upset, your presence—your simply being with them, their knowing that you are available—will be reassuring.

Dr. Evans, a psychologist and school consultant, is the Director of the Human Relations Service in Wellesley.