



What is my role in dealing with grieving students?

Let's look more closely at one of the roles the school itself plays in the lives of its students before answering this question. One of the functions of an educator is to teach students 'life skills'. Students learn, for example, how to read maps so they don't get lost; how to count money to buy necessary goods; how to read and write in order to facilitate communication. All of these activities should be considered 'life skills'.

If we remember that death is an intrinsic and unavoidable part of life and that 'life as usual' includes death, it becomes evident that dealing with death can appropriately be labeled as another life skill. What's your role in all of this? Here are some guidelines:

- Your school's policies and procedures are your starting point. For student and faculty deaths, these policies should provide you with a framework for integrating your role and responsibilities into the overall school response plan. Many schools, for example, provide faculty with a written announcement of the death to read to students and an outline of where and how to refer students who may need additional support. In many instances, a member of the school's crisis team will follow the class schedule of the deceased to address student questions and concerns. Emergency faculty meetings may be scheduled for updates and briefings.
- In other situations, like the death of a parent, your role and responsibilities may be less clear. Usually in-class announcements about parental deaths are limited to the classroom of the bereaved student, especially in grade school or middle school. In high school, an announcement may be made in a homeroom, if it's appropriate. Information can be simple and limited. "I have some sad news. Alison's mother died over the weekend. I know you will join me in sending her kind thoughts."
- Whatever the circumstances of the death, it is very helpful for you to pay attention to the reactions of the students. While you can expect students who had a relationship with the deceased to be affected by the news, remember that this event might open the 'grief closet' of other students. Watch for changes in behavior and performance and alert your resource staff to students whose actions have changed since the event. If your school does not have a resource staff, talk to the parent/guardian of the students about whom you are concerned about.
- Continue to pay attention throughout the school year to those students who were especially affected by the death. A decline in school performance, even months after the death, might signal delayed grief symptoms. Again, share your concerns with resource staff or parents and encourage their intervention.

If your school does not have policies and procedures for responding to deaths, talk with your school administrator about their possible utility. In the meantime, you can certainly apply the guidelines suggested here in a less formal sense. In the absence of school resources you will need to rely more heavily on community resources for support, so investigate what's available BEFORE you are in a crisis.