

This document provides a brief guideline for parents/guardians during times when students are dealing with the news of a death that affects a school community. While each student will be affected differently depending on development level, cultural beliefs, personal characteristics, family situation and previous experiences, it is hoped that these strategies can be helpful in supporting children and youth in your care

Be understanding and tolerant of common grief reactions (see list below). Your child may even feel angry toward the deceased for leaving them

Be simple and straightforward, discuss death in developmentally appropriate terms. Let younger children know that death is not contagious and that although a particular individual has died that it is unusual for children to die and that it doesn't mean they or a member of their family will die as well

Be brief and patient, remember that you may have to answer the same question multiple times and repeat key information to ensure understanding. Listen, acknowledge feelings and be nonjudgmental

A grief reaction might not necessarily be solely as a result of the identified death. It may be a reaction to the memory of a previous loss that this current event has brought to the surface for the student

Grief is not solely related to the death of a loved one. The symptoms, characteristics and process can be similar to other types of loss (e.g. divorce, transition, moving, etc.)

Grief does not have a timeline. Caregivers should be aware of anniversaries, birthdays, developmental milestones and other factors that could affect a child or youth months or even years after the loss

Grief is often characterized by sadness, emotional pain and introspection in adults. The grief of children and youth differ according to their development level and may include the following:

Elementary	Secondary
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• decreased academic performance, attention, concentration and/or attendance</li> <li>• irritability, aggression and/or disruptive behaviours</li> <li>• somatic complaints (headache, stomach ache)</li> <li>• sleep/eating disturbances</li> <li>• social withdrawal</li> <li>• guilt, depression and/or anxiety</li> <li>• repeated retelling of the event</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• decreased academic performance, attention, concentration and/or attendance</li> <li>• anxiety</li> <li>• avoidance, withdrawal, high risk behavior and/or substance misuse</li> <li>• difficulty with peer relations</li> <li>• nightmares, flashbacks</li> <li>• emotional numbing or depression</li> <li>• suicidal thoughts</li> </ul>

Things to Avoid	Things to Do
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid euphemisms such as, “<i>They passed away,</i>” or “<i>They are sleeping.</i>”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To avoid confusion, use accurate terms such as ‘<i>dead</i>’ or ‘<i>dying</i>’</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not use minimizing statements, such as, “<i>It was someone you hardly knew.</i>”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give your child permission to grieve; their reaction may be about something else entirely that this event has triggered</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoid implying a timeframe to complete the grieving process, such as, “<i>It’s been a month, you should be over this by now.</i>”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Normalize expressed feelings by telling your child that this is common after a death and that there is no one right way to feel</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not attempt to over identify by telling your child, “<i>I know how you feel.</i>”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connect with your child to determine their understanding of the event and their emotional state</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• While being respectful of your child’s need for privacy and to process the event, do not allow them to withdraw from family life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain routines in as normal a fashion as possible</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The desire for a certain amount of alone time is to be expected but should not be encouraged to the exclusion of social activity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage your child to adopt healthy coping strategies, particularly ones that involve interaction with peers (e.g. sports or clubs)</li> </ul>

Grieving is a normal response to loss but may require some support. Additional assistance should be provided if the following are noticed:

- Marked loss of interest in daily activities
- Changes in eating and/or sleeping habits
- Wishing to be with the deceased
- Fear of being alone
- Significant decrease in academic performance or achievement
- Increased somatic complaint
- Changes in attendance patterns (i.e. chronic absenteeism)

**If you have concerns regarding your child’s coping following a death or critical incident, discuss your concerns with one of the following:**

- Your child’s school counsellor
- Your family doctor
- A community mental health professional:
  - Child & Adolescent Program (Child & Youth Mental Health) **604-204-1111**
  - Chimo Crisis Line **604-279-7070**