

## Talking to Children about Death

Children need and deserve to know the truth about and death. If we don't tell them the truth, what they imagine will always be far worse. White lies and euphemisms create problems. These statements can leave them more frightened and confused. Children can be resilient and cope when provided with support and facilitation of their grief.

Help children to grieve and express their emotional responses about the loss. Children need to be validated. Teach your children to cry by letting them see you cry. Let them know that anger is okay. Also some children don't feel upset and then feel guilty for not feeling much. They do not need to pretend to be upset. Any range of emotion is acceptable and should be addressed as presented.

### Grieving Children:

Concrete thinkers who are beginning to develop logical thinking patterns along with increased language and cognitive ability. After a death they question how their lives will be different, what will be the same, and how one knows the person is really dead. Try to give simple, honest answers to their questions. 6-12 year olds want to see death as reversible but are beginning to understand the finality and permanence of death.

### Common Grief Reactions

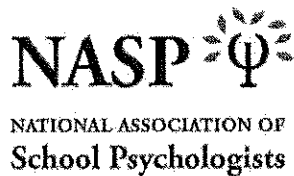
Feelings	Physical	Thoughts	Behaviors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Sadness</li> <li>● Depression</li> <li>● Anger</li> <li>● Guilt</li> <li>● Fear</li> <li>● Disbelief</li> <li>● Anxiety</li> <li>● Loneliness</li> <li>● Fatigue</li> <li>● Helplessness</li> <li>● Shock</li> <li>● Numbness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Hollowness</li> <li>● Tightness in chest</li> <li>● Tightness in throat</li> <li>● Oversensitive to noise</li> <li>● Sense that nothing seems real</li> <li>● Out of breath</li> <li>● Headache</li> <li>● Lack of energy</li> <li>● Dry mouth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Disbelief</li> <li>● Confusion</li> <li>● Preoccupation</li> <li>● Racing thoughts</li> <li>● Pushing feelings away</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Sleep problems</li> <li>● Appetite disturbance</li> <li>● Forgetful</li> <li>● Social withdrawal</li> <li>● Bad dreams</li> <li>● Trouble concentrating</li> <li>● Restless/overactive</li> <li>● Wanting to be left along</li> </ul>

**How to help:**

Answer questions clearly and accurately. Provide art, journals, music and movement. Make time for physical outlets: sports, games, walks etc. Help the child identify their support system. Work with the child on school assignments. Encourage the child to take breaks from school work and to have some alone time when needed or time with the school nurse or school counselor. Having a safe space to go when needed is crucial. Allow for expression of feelings. Maintain routines and structure, but allow for flexibility. Treating the friend as "normal" as possible and try including him/her in activities. Do not tell children not to ask questions. Children will naturally ask questions and that helps to make things as normal as possible. Children who have had a loss, often want to talk about their loved one.

When families join together to face a crisis and the adults are willing and open to talk to the children and answer their questions, the crisis becomes more manageable. This is true even if the death is accompanied by stigma and sometimes guilt and shame. Research has been done on children who have lost parents to AIDS. It was found that stigma and multiple loss were factors that complicated the children's grief process. Factors that helped with the healing process were: sustained care and support for the children, open family communication, consistency and environmental stability.

Some children fear acknowledging grief, much like some adults for fear of emotional flooding. Grief is powerful and the emotions felt can be overwhelming. Many choose to avoid thinking or talking about the loss as they worry that if they were to feel fully their grief, they may never stop crying. Children need direct encouragement to express their grief and acknowledge their pain. They need to be reassured by adults that this is a good thing to do. Some children fear disappointing their loved ones by showing their true feelings. Some fear being chastised for crying. It is important for adults in children's lives to let the children know that all of their feelings will be understood and accepted. Giving children permission to grieve as well as healthy opportunities to express that grief in safe ways is all part of helping children to cope and grow through life's losses and transitions. Children who learn that feelings are simply feelings and that they don't have to hide them or feel ashamed or embarrassed by them, are that much better at learning about the life-long process of healthy mourning.



## Supporting Children's Mental Health: Tips for Parents and Educators

**Create a sense of belonging.** Feeling connected and welcomed is essential to children's positive adjustment, self-identification, and sense of trust in others and themselves. Building strong, positive relationships among students, school staff, and parents is important to promoting mental wellness.

**Promote resilience.** Adversity is a natural part of life and being resilient is important to overcoming challenges and good mental health. Connectedness, competency, helping others, and successfully facing difficult situations can foster resilience.

**Develop competencies.** Children need to know that they can overcome challenges and accomplish goals through their actions. Achieving academic success and developing individual talents and interests helps children feel competent and more able to deal with stress positively. Social competency is also important. Having friends and staying connected to friends and loved ones can enhance mental wellness.

**Ensure a positive, safe school environment.** Feeling safe is critical to students' learning and mental health. Promote positive behaviors such as respect, responsibility, and kindness. Prevent negative behaviors such as bullying and harassment. Provide easily understood rules of conduct and fair discipline practices and ensure an adult presence in common areas, such as hallways, cafeterias, locker rooms, and playgrounds. Teach children to work together to stand up to a bully, encourage them to reach out to lonely or excluded peers, celebrate acts of kindness, and reinforce the availability of adult support.

**Teach and reinforce positive behaviors and decision making.** Provide consistent expectations and support. Teaching children social skills, problem solving, and conflict resolution supports good mental health. "Catch" them being successful. Positive feedback validates and reinforces behaviors or accomplishments that are valued by others.

**Encourage helping others.** Children need to know that they can make a difference. Pro-social behaviors build self-esteem, foster connectedness, reinforce personal responsibility, and present opportunities for positive recognition. Helping others and getting involved in reinforces being part of the community.

**Encourage good physical health.** Good physical health supports good mental health. Healthy eating habits, regular exercise and adequate sleep protect kids against the stress of tough situations. Regular exercise also decreases negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, and depression.

***Educate staff, parents and students on symptoms of and help for mental health problems.***

Information helps break down the stigma surrounding mental health and enables adults and students recognize when to seek help. School mental health professionals can provide useful information on symptoms of problems like depression or suicide risk. These can include a change in habits, withdrawal, decreased social and academic functioning, erratic or changed behavior, and increased physical complaints.

***Ensure access to school-based mental health supports.*** School psychologists, counselors, and social workers can provide a continuum of mental health services for students ranging from universal mental wellness promotion and behavior supports to staff and parent training, identification and assessment, early interventions, individual and group counseling, crisis intervention, and referral for community services.

***Provide a continuum of mental health services.*** School mental health services are part of a continuum of mental health care for children and youth. Build relationships with community mental health resources. Be able to provide names and numbers to parents.

***Establish a crisis response team.*** Being prepared to respond to a crisis is important to safeguarding students' physical and mental well-being. School crisis teams should include relevant administrators, security personnel and mental health professionals who collaborate with community resources. In addition to safety, the team provides mental health prevention, intervention, and postvention services.

NASP has developed a Spanish translation of this handout to share with Spanish speaking students, families, and staff.

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