



Talking to Students about the Death of a Student or Faculty Member

After a student or faculty member dies, it is important for teachers to be able to discuss the death with their students. Students often look at teachers as trusted adults in which they can confide. Even though teachers are not trained as counselors, they can still set up a healthy environment for students to express how they feel.

Here are some tips about how to open up and close a discussion about death in the classroom and what signs to look for in students that may need additional counseling.

Setup

1. Before speaking to your students about the death of a classmate or faculty member, be sure you have as many facts as possible. Schools should have a prepared statement for teachers with accurate information to relay to students.
2. Be aware of your own emotions about the situation before beginning the discussion. Many different factors can play a role in your emotions after the death of a student or faculty member. The closeness of the relationship and amount of time spent with the individual can have a significant impact on how you will react. Even if you were not close to that individual, emotions may arise from other losses in your life. If you think you may become too emotional, ask for the school counselor's assistance or have a substitute ready to help you in the class if you need to spend a few minutes addressing your own emotions.

Discussion

1. *Begin the discussion with facts*, such as how the death occurred, what is known about funeral arrangements, and other details that the family has allowed to be shared.
2. *Validate students' emotions in a gentle way*. This part of the conversation can begin with a statement such as, "John's accident is very sad and may stir up a lot of feelings including sadness or anger. All of these are normal reactions." Avoid using euphemisms and platitudes, and use a normal tone of voice.
3. *Have an activity ready for students to express themselves*, especially if they were close to the person who died. This can include writing letters to the family of the deceased or creating a memory box to place items or letters from younger children. There are many creative ways to allow students to focus their grief in a constructive way.

4. *Check in on individual students during the activity.* During the activity, you may want to walk around the room and check in on those students that you know were especially close to the person who died. You may ask, “I know you were good friends with John. How are you doing?”

5. *End the discussion with facts.* Tell students about resources available to them to help them address their own emotions if needed. Explain the protocol to visit the school counselor or counseling center at the school. Let them know that they will not be penalized for missing the assignment that day if they need to go talk with the counselor.

6. *Have a lesson plan prepared.* Even though it can be emotional after the death of a student or faculty member, it is important to maintain routine and structure. Having a light lesson planned for the day can allow students to get back to their routine faster. This may be something quiet, such as a worksheet or deskwork for the remainder of the class. It is advised that this lesson not be too difficult or a totally new concept for students, but a topic that will allow them to focus their attention back to schoolwork.

Know When to Refer to a Counselor or Mental Health Professional

It is important for teachers to not assume the level of distress a student may experience after the death of another student or faculty member. The death may not only affect those close to the deceased, but it may cause some students to revisit other losses in their own lives. It is not unusual for a student that has experienced the loss of a family member or other close friend to become emotional, even if the relationship to the deceased doesn't seem significant to an outsider.

Normal Reactions

- Crying, talking, emotional distress.
- Grades drop in the short-term (few weeks) after the death
- Lack of focus in the short-term (few weeks) after the death

Reactions that may need additional support

- Significant behavior changes, such as acting out or disruptive behavior
- Grades drop and don't rebound after several weeks after the death
- Lack of focus continues after several weeks impacting schoolwork
- Truancy
- Self-destructive behavior
- Apathy
- Substance abuse

The Amelia Center is a department of Children's of Alabama and United Way of Central Alabama agency that serves as a comprehensive community grief counseling center. The Amelia Center provides individual and family grief counseling services at no set fee to individuals.