

# **Administrative Guide**

## **Dealing with School-wide Loss**

**The School Board of  
Sarasota County, Florida  
Pupil Support Services**

*Revised October 2006*

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# **I. Introduction**

## **Introduction**

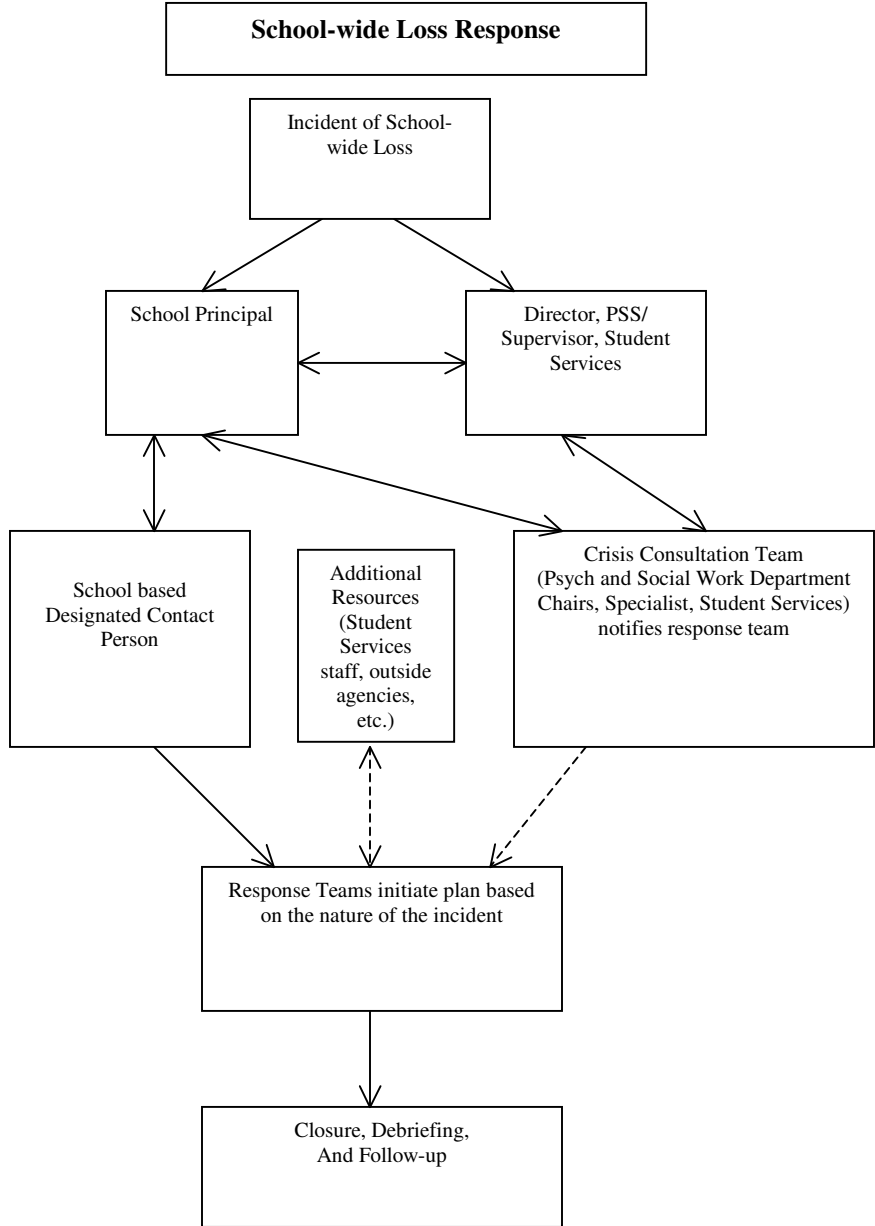
In a time of school-wide loss, Student Services is prepared to provide assistance (along with the school based team) in helping members of the school community deal with the loss. Typically, school wide-loss may include the death of a student, teacher, etc. The school principal, the Director of Pupil Support Services or the Supervisor of Student Services may initiate a Student Services Crisis Team response. The Student Services team works jointly with the school based team in responding to the situation.

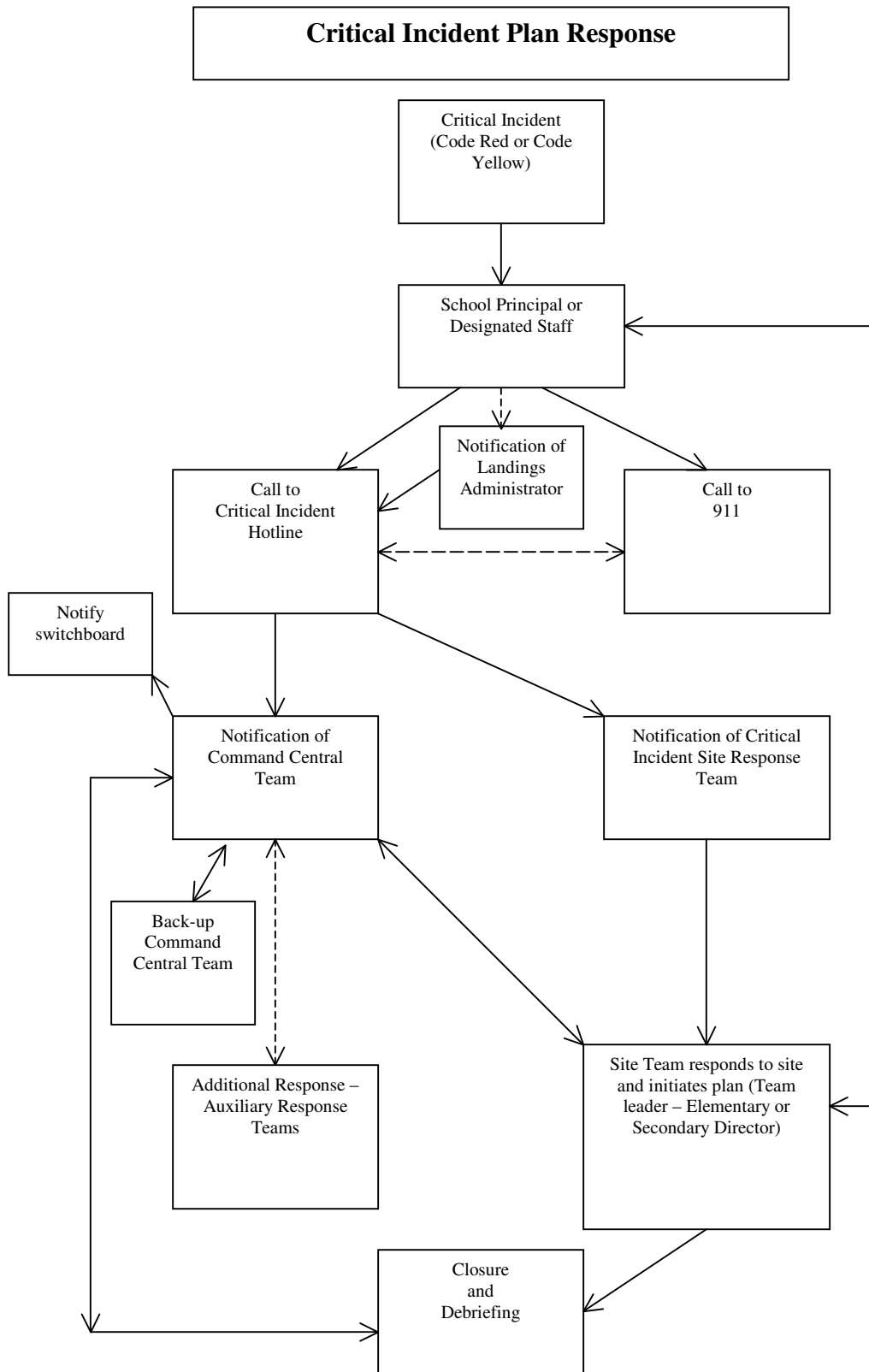
The flowchart (see page 5) is provided as a suggested guide in addressing a school based crisis. As conceived, the school based crisis intervention team will handle most situations. This Administrative Guide provides suggestions for best practices. It is recommended that each school review this information and make changes to accommodate their particular campus needs. In the event that the loss is of a magnitude that necessitates additional assistance, the Student Services Crisis Team is prepared to provide that help.

A separate district response team is prepared to assist in the event of a critical incident (see flow chart on page 6). A critical incident is defined as any unplanned event that can cause significant injury to employees, students, visitors, or the public or that can shut down a school, disrupt operations, cause physical or environmental damage, or threaten the campus operational standing or public image. In the event of a critical incident, refer to the school's Critical Incident Plan and the current Sarasota County Schools Critical Incident Plan Staff Guide.

This manual is the result of a collaborative effort of school psychologists, social workers, and Student Services specialist. The manual will be reviewed annually and updated as necessary. As you work with this guide and have suggestions for further revisions or training related to school wide loss, please contact the Supervisor of Student Services at 927-4036.

## **II. Overview and Flow Charts**





**In the event of a critical incident, please refer to your school's Critical Incident Plan and the Staff Guide to Critical Incident Plans.**

### **III. Key Roles and Responsibilities**

## **Administrator (Principal or Designee)**

### **Primary Responsibilities (Prevention and Preparation)**

- ❑ Establish a school-wide plan for crisis intervention and school-wide loss
- ❑ Review and update the plan yearly to reflect changes in school support staff and responsibilities
- ❑ Establish a “second in command” in case the administrator is not available
- ❑ Designate a school based contact person
- ❑ Establish and update a telephone tree
- ❑ Develop/update a school policy regarding memorials, plaques, etc.
- ❑ Establish a plan for student and staff attendance at memorial services and funerals
- ❑ Collaborate with school support staff on curriculum used for character development (e.g., tolerance and empathy, bullying)

### **Secondary Responsibilities (Intervention)**

- ❑ Verify facts of situation prior to notification
- ❑ Notify central administration (i.e., Director, Pupil Support Services or Supervisor, Student Services)
- ❑ Notification to staff prior to entering school
  - School phone tree
  - Faculty meeting before school
    - At faculty meeting assess staff needs and capabilities
    - Provide staff with resources/handouts for parents
    - Discussion of possible team teaching for support
- ❑ Call to offer support to grieving family
- ❑ Prepare a factual statement to provide to school staff who may interact with public
- ❑ Notification to parents
  - Call or letter to parents/guardians
- ❑ Dispel myths and rumors
- ❑ Notify school based response team
  - Coordinate a designated location for school wide support staff to facilitate and coordinate counseling and support activities
  - Support school-wide support staff’s basic needs
- ❑ Coordinate roles and communication
- ❑ Gather together the personal effects of the deceased. Determine the most appropriate manner to present these items to the family
  - Throughout the day, follow up with school staff to continually assess the needs of staff and students
  - Alter daily schedule to reflect the needs of the school
  - Ask school staff to increase visibility during student transitions

### **Tertiary Responsibilities (Postvention and Follow-up)**

- ❑ Meet with school-wide response team to debrief and plan follow-up services as needed
  - Review actions of the day
  - Identify strengths and weakness of intervention
  - Review status of referred students
  - Prioritize support staff needed for the next day
  - Allow time for emotional debriefing
    - Debrief and follow up with school staff to continually assess needs of staff and students
    - Assist in stopping any disciplinary, scholarship, testing, or special placement notifications that may inadvertently be sent to the family

## Student Support Staff

**(Guidance Counselor, ESE Liaison, Behavior Specialist, School Psychologist, School Social Worker, Home School Liaisons, etc)**

### **Primary Responsibilities (Prevention and Preparation)**

- ❑ Develop a list of community-based counseling resources (which provide services on a sliding fee scale) that may be given to parents/guardians.
- ❑ Obtain or create a list of possible interpreters available to the school.
- ❑ Prepare a box of supplies for use with groups of students and staff.
  - Tissues
  - Paper
  - Pencils and Crayons
  - Stamps
  - Ribbon
  - Pins
  - Books on grief and loss (various ages)
  - Counseling games or activities
- ❑ Prepare passes for teachers to provide to students for counseling
- ❑ Prepare handouts for teachers and parents on issues related to school-wide loss (e.g., suicide warning signs)
- ❑ Facilitate groups and classes for students on skill development
  - Positive Choices/Anger Management
  - Friendship skills
  - Grief and Loss (e.g. Rainbows)
  - Social Skills
  - Tolerance
  - Bullying
  - Etc.
- ❑ Facilitate workshops from community agencies on the stages of grief and loss, child abuse and reporting, etc. (e.g., Hospice, Department of Children and Families, Child Protection Team/Center)

### **Secondary Responsibilities (Intervention)**

- ❑ Cancel non-emergency appointments and meetings to participate in crisis counseling.
- ❑ Notify school administration of your relationship with the family
- ❑ Notify school administration of specific family circumstances (transportation, guardianship, financial, religious beliefs, other family support)
- ❑ If siblings attend different schools, notify school of possible needed intervention
- ❑ Provide individual, small group, or classroom support services as needed
- ❑ Maintain a list of students needing and receiving counseling services
- ❑ Provide services to students identified as having a need
  - Notify parents of the needs of their students that may require additional support
- ❑ Assist staff who may be dealing with issues of loss
- ❑ Ensure that there is a liaison between the grieving family and school
- ❑ Notify staff of grieving family's needs and requests
- ❑ Assist in obtaining translators for Limited English Proficient (LEP) students and families
- ❑ Assist, as needed, in contacting community support agencies to provide services
- ❑ Assess school climate and consult with administration on actions to be taken

**Tertiary Responsibilities (Postvention and Follow-up)**

- ❑ Monitor student's emotional state and discuss students at Intervention Assistance Team if appropriate
- ❑ Continue to monitor school climate to assess needs
- ❑ Follow up with students to assess need for further support services
- ❑ Continue with secondary responsibilities as needed
- ❑ Meet with administrator to debrief and plan follow-up services as needed

## Classroom Teachers

### Primary Responsibilities (Prevention and Preparation)

- ❑ Review information on grief reactions
- ❑ Assemble activities to help students process school-wide loss
- ❑ Think about and discuss with school-wide loss team how to address the issue of the student's personal belongings and school space (i.e., desk)

### Secondary Responsibilities (Intervention)

- ❑ Openly and honestly acknowledge the situation
- ❑ Provide students with facts of school wide-loss in age appropriate terms
- ❑ Allow students to express their feelings and validate those feelings
- ❑ Consult with school support staff (counselors, school psychologists, social workers) for additional resources and support
- ❑ Identify students who may need additional support services and refer to school support staff
  - For example:
    - Ask "Who was a close friend of \_\_\_\_\_?"
    - Ask "Who was an acquaintance of \_\_\_\_\_?"
    - Ask "Have you ever experienced a similar loss?"
- ❑ Provide opportunities for students to express thoughts and feelings through writing, discussion, and pictures
- ❑ Re-evaluate planned assignments and give consideration to modifying assignments
- ❑ Utilize assignments which help students express their feelings
- ❑ Postpone and reschedule tests as needed
- ❑ Monitor for students who may have unresolved grief and make appropriate referrals if necessary
- ❑ Monitor students' time out of the classroom (e.g., time in bathroom, etc.)
- ❑ Share children's books that deal with loss
- ❑ Provide student with the opportunity to remember "good times" and share with class

### Tertiary Responsibilities (Postvention and Follow-up)

- ❑ Allow time for students to grieve
- ❑ Refer to secondary responsibilities as needed
- ❑ Continue to be sensitive to student reactions and needs throughout the year
- ❑ Maintain communication with parents of your students to continually assess needs
- ❑ Debrief your reactions with your team members or school support staff (Take care of yourself!)

## **School Resource Officer (SRO)**

### **Primary Responsibilities (Prevention and Preparation)**

- Educate students and staff on:
  - Drinking and Driving
  - Drug Abuse
  - Seatbelt Safety
  - Domestic Violence
  - Homicide and Suicide Investigation Information
- Maintain and assure campus security

### **Secondary Responsibilities (Intervention)**

- Contact and help facilitate appropriate law enforcement
- Interview students and staff as needed
- Facilitate access to victim assistance services for families

### **Tertiary Responsibilities (Postvention and Follow-up)**

- Provide assistance to students and staff as needed
- Refer to secondary responsibilities as needed

## **IV. Types of Crises and Response Overviews**

## **SUDDEN DEATH/ LOSS OF STUDENT OR STAFF**

The sudden death/loss of a student or staff member in the school system is a tragic event. This can include car accidents, homicide, and accidental deaths (i.e., drowning, sports related fatalities, etc.). When a sudden death occurs, members of the school community typically experience shock and denial. This reaction may be prolonged due to a variety of factors. The impact of a long-term illness and our response needs to be altered appropriately depending on the circumstances. For example, some people may experience survivor's guilt or have unresolved conflicts.

### **DEATH FROM A LONG-TERM ILLNESS**

If a student or staff member dies from a long-term or chronic illness, it may cause a disruption in the school community. These could include deaths from cancer, cystic fibrosis or other chronic illnesses. The specifics of a situation change with each event and alter the way we handle the crisis.

### **SUICIDE**

Teen suicide is the second leading cause of death among 11 to 19 year olds. Student suicide has a profound impact on the students, staff, and the community. Students and staff members who held a close relationship with the deceased student should be monitored and be reminded that counseling services are available. It is important to acknowledge the death but not to glorify the event.

If a student presents with *suicidal ideation* please refer to the appropriate procedures on page 17.

### **ISSUES SURROUNDING NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY DISASTER SITUATIONS**

National and community disasters (e.g., September 11<sup>th</sup>, Columbine, hurricanes, or the homicide of a prominent figure) may have a direct impact on our students and staff. It is important to maintain a sense of order to the highest degree possible. Return to the normal school routine as quickly as possible and provide assistance to individuals in overcoming the impact of the event to prevent unnecessary disruption.

To assist in the grieving process, memorials are often beneficial. Examples could include a mural, tree planting, donation to charities, or a dedication page in the school yearbook.

## PROCEDURES FOR RESPONDING TO STUDENTS WITH SUICIDAL IDEATION

### **Primary Response: Prevention**

Compile a list and description of programs currently being offered at the school that develop *Resiliency*. For example, some schools have adopted the Community of Caring framework.

Training should be made available for teachers and support staff in order to identify warning signs of self-harm and suicidal ideations: Verbal, Physical, Themes in School Work, Academic, Feelings, Actions, Situational Factors, Email/Internet.

### **Secondary Response: Responding to Reports of Self-Harm and Suicidal Ideation**

A report of self-harm or suicidal ideation is made by a student (self-report), and/or to a peer, teacher, school staff, parent, or other person.



The report of self-harm or suicidal ideation is brought to the attention of the **school personnel who were trained in screening for self-harm and suicidal ideation.**



The Next Course of Action is Dependent on the Outcome of the Screening by the School Personnel who were Trained in Screening for Self Harm and Suicidal Ideation.

### **IN ALL CASES THE PARENT/GUARDIAN MUST BE NOTIFIED.**

**Contact with the Parent/Guardian can be made either by telephone or in-person.**

**A follow-up letter called the *Duty To Warn Notification* is completed and sent to the parent/guardian. The *Parent Conference Form* is completed in order to document parent contact and notification.**



### **IF LOW RISK OF SELF-HARM**

Parent/Guardian is notified of events and the student may be released into parental/guardian care or allowed back into the classroom. The *Parent Conference Form* and the *Duty to Warn Notification* are completed. Student may be asked to sign a *No-Harm Contract* (if developmentally appropriate). The student may be referred for in-school counseling. The administration and teacher(s) are informed of events. Follow-up meeting with the student is scheduled.

### **IF MODERATE TO HIGH RISK OF SELF-HARM**

Contact the School Resource Officer or Local Police Department. The police officer will determine whether the student needs to be placed under a Baker Act . If the student is placed under a Baker Act the parent/guardian is notified of the events and the *Parent Conference Form* and the *Duty To Warn Notification* are completed. If the student does not meet the requirements to be placed under a Baker Act the student needs to be supervised at school and monitored for change. Release the student to the parent/guardian with a signed parent conference form indicating parental/guardian follow up care. In either situation the administration and teacher(s) are informed of events. Follow-up meeting with the student is scheduled.

### **Tertiary Response: Follow Up Care**

School staff should carefully monitor students who were at risk for harming themselves. Teachers of students at risk should be informed of the students' condition.

If applicable, contact the mental health professional that works with the identified student (**Authorization for Release and Exchange of Information** form must be completed). The treatment plan developed by the mental health professional could then be discussed with the school personnel who were trained in screening self-harm and suicidal ideation. The administration and teacher(s) should be informed and updated of the student's condition.

Facilitate the student's involvement in programs that develop *Resiliency*. Consult with the Collaborative Student Intervention Team to develop strategies for helping the student develop resiliency.

## **Response Guide for all Crises**

### A. Assessment of Crisis

1. Complete Initial Crisis Information form as team convenes at onset of crisis (update as needed)
2. Determine if additional support is needed and appropriate: school or community
3. Determine need for schedule adjustments

### B. Intervention: Communication

1. Faculty meeting
  - a. Review facts of crisis and disseminate information as appropriate
  - b. Inform teachers of the referral process for students
2. Rumor control: use crisis intake form
3. Contact neighboring schools if appropriate
4. Refer media to Public Relations Director

### C. Intervention/Counseling

1. Room for group counseling
2. Room for individual counseling
3. Parent information center
4. Staff support center
5. Provide classroom counseling as needed
6. Refer to community agencies/ inform parents

### D. Intervention: Debriefing (daily)

1. Provide space to review actions of the day
2. Prioritize needs/personnel
3. Identify high risk students/staff
4. Plan for follow-up

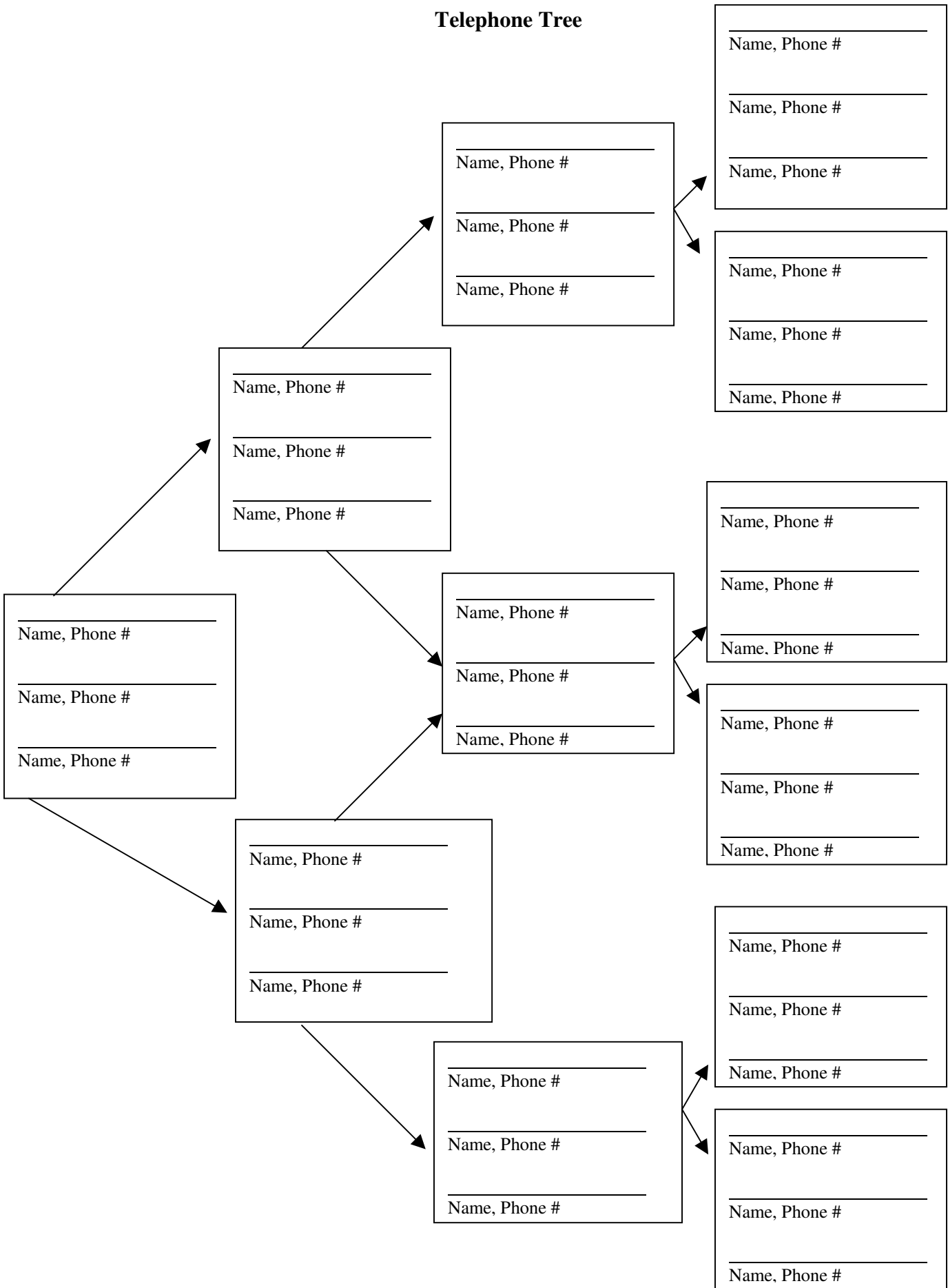
## **V. Sample Forms/Letters/etc.**

This section includes a variety of sample letters and announcements that can be used in communication with parents, teachers, and students. Some letters and announcements may also be suitable to use via communication on the BBS. The following recommendations should be considered regardless of what letter is chosen or developed:

- 1) Name and contact number for your school based designated contact person should be included.
- 2) Description of the event should be factual and specific.
- 3) Include what services will be available at the school. This can vary depending upon the specific incident that occurred.
- 4) Administrators are encouraged to let parents, teachers, and students know what additional information will be shared (e.g., funeral services, donation information, memorials, etc.).

Current available community resources are also included in the next section. The school based designated contact person should share these with families when further assistance is needed.

# Telephone Tree



## SAMPLE LETTER FROM PRINCIPAL TO PARENTS

(Date)

Dear Parents / Guardians,

The (school name) crisis intervention team has been asked to assist the students, faculty, and parents of (name of student) in coping with (identify/describe circumstances). The team includes school staff and district level personnel who have been specially trained to assist in crisis situations. In conjunction with school personnel, crisis intervention team members are available to help students deal with their reactions to the recent event(s).

Some students may request to talk with someone. Other students who could benefit from assistance are reluctant to seek help. We are asking you, therefore, as concerned parents, to let us know if you think your child could benefit from services. If you would like to talk to someone about these services, please call (give name and number of school-based designated contact person) and ask for services. Trained staff will be available to assist in this situation.

Sincerely,

Principal

**SAMPLE LETTER TO PARENTS REGARDING DEATH OF FACULTY MEMBER OR STUDENT**

(Date)

Dear Parents / Guardians,

The students and staff of (school name) experienced a tragedy today with the death of one of our (year) grade (students/teachers), (name of student/teacher). All of us are grieving this tragic loss.

To assist the students and staff to handle this loss, a special crisis intervention team is serving the school. An increased level of individual and group counseling services has been made available. We will continue to provide these services to students as long as they are needed. You may contact the school directly to request these services for your son/daughter, if you feel they are needed.

Please be aware that your child may experience strong feelings in response to this tragedy, including sorrow and depression as well as anger and fear. Your child may have a special need at this time for your comfort and support; please try to be available to listen to them.

This is a very difficult time for all of us. We want to be sensitive to the needs of your son/daughter. Please contact (name of school-based designated contact person) at (phone number) if we can be of any assistance.

Sincerely,

Principal

## SAMPLE LETTER FROM PRINCIPAL TO FACULTY

DATE:

TO: Faculty

FROM: Principal

I understand that this is a very difficult time for faculty and students. It may be particularly difficult for some of you most directly related to this crisis. I would like to offer my condolences and my assistance in any way possible. As you may know, a crisis intervention team is available to assist us. The individuals on the team are available to the faculty and students who would like to talk about their reactions to the recent event(s).

The team has requested that you watch for students needing special assistance. These might be students displaying behaviors that are unusual for them. For example, they might be distraught, tearful, excessively quiet for long periods, excessively talkative, agitated, or disruptive. In some cases, students may approach you and request help. If such students come to your attention, please notify (name of school-based designated contact person).

\* Attached you will find a list of reactions common to the grieving process. These are considered a normal part of grieving and should not be viewed as alarming unless they continue for an excessive length of time (e.g., more than 6 months) or significantly interfere with the student's ability to perform in the classroom.

If there is anything that can be done to help you or someone else, please let me know.

\* See page 31–Stages of Grief

## SAMPLE ANNOUNCEMENTS

### **In Classroom: (Individual Loss)**

Johnny will not be in school today. His mother was killed in an automobile crash last night. Her car was struck by a truck on I-95. Johnny will be very sad for a long time. Perhaps we can discuss some ways Johnny might be feeling and how we can all help.

### **In Classroom: (School-Wide Loss)**

We have something very sad to tell you today. Johnny was driving home in the rain last night. His car swerved into an oncoming lane, was struck by a car and went off the road. Johnny died in the crash. It was sudden and he did not suffer.

(Remain silent a moment or two to allow information to be realized).

I know this is a very shocking to all of us and we have planned several things to help you.

### **Over P.A.: (School-Wide Loss)**

Our school has suffered a great, great loss. Mrs. (name), the science teacher, has been ill with cancer for many months now. We just received word that her suffering has come to an end and Mrs. (name) has died. We will be commemorating Mrs. (name)'s contribution to our school community. At this time, I'd like each class to discuss the ways they would like to commemorate the life of Mrs. (name).

### **In Classroom: (Suicide)**

An unfortunate tragedy occurred to one of our students, (name of student). He/she took his/her own life on (date).

It is sad that this has occurred, because suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem.

## INITIAL CRISIS INFORMATION

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Administrator: \_\_\_\_\_

School: \_\_\_\_\_

School Crisis Contact Person: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Victim Information:**

Victim's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age/Grade: \_\_\_\_\_ Sex: \_\_\_\_\_ Language: \_\_\_\_\_

Special Placement: \_\_\_\_\_

Extracurricular activities: \_\_\_\_\_

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Type of Crisis:**

\_\_\_\_\_ Death of Student: \_\_\_\_\_ Illness \_\_\_\_\_ Suicide \_\_\_\_\_ Homicide \_\_\_\_\_ Accident

\_\_\_\_\_ Death of Faculty Member: \_\_\_\_\_ Illness \_\_\_\_\_ Suicide \_\_\_\_\_ Homicide \_\_\_\_\_ Accident

\_\_\_\_\_ Disaster: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Impact on School:**

Who: The students and staff affected by the person who has died.

\_\_\_\_\_

How: The circumstances of the death.

\_\_\_\_\_

Where: Location of incident.

\_\_\_\_\_

### **Information for the Crisis Team on Site:**

\_\_\_\_\_ Medical Information

\_\_\_\_\_ Police Report

\_\_\_\_\_ Newspaper clippings

\_\_\_\_\_ Person(s) most knowledgeable about incident

## **VI. Resource Guide**

## COMMUNITY RESOURCES FOR MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING

For specific and most current information on community agencies providing counseling / mental health services, contact United Way 2-1-1 of Manasota, Inc. by dialing 211 or (941) 308-4357 from an office or home phone. If you are using a cell phone, you must dial (941) 308-4357 or search the internet at [www.suncoasthelp.org](http://www.suncoasthelp.org).

**Bayside Center for Behavioral Health at  
Sarasota Memorial Hospital.....(941) 917-7760**

1650 S. Osprey Avenue, Sarasota 34239

*Full continuum of services for children and adolescents, adults, and seniors, including inpatient, partial hospitalization, intensive outpatient, group therapy, and individual therapy. Free assessments, financial counseling and transportation are available. This is a dual diagnosis program. Open 24 hours per day.*

**Coastal Recovery Centers .....(941) 364-9355**

Crisis Stabilization Unit  
1451 10<sup>th</sup> St., Sarasota 34236

*Adult and children's units. Provides screening and assessments for those seeking emergency mental health assistance. Facilitates admission to inpatient treatment and / or provides outpatient referrals.*

**Family Emergency Treatment Center.....(941) 952 – 1147**

2750 Bahia Vista Street, Suite 175, Sarasota 34205

*Provides immediate counseling and referral services to those who need mental health and/or substance abuse services. Walk-ins welcome. Open M – F.*

**The Florida Center for Child and Family Development ..... (941) 371-8820**

Main Campus, 4620 17<sup>th</sup> Street, Sarasota 34235

**South County – Gulf Coast Center ..... (941) 412-9186**

800 Gulf Coast Blvd., Venice 34286

*Provides counseling for individuals, couples, and families of all ages as well as support groups. Various support groups are facilitated by professionals on subjects such as: parenting and nurturing classes for families and children, grandparents raising grandchildren, other groups. Support group at schools (RAINBOWS) for losses due to death or divorce. FAST program: Families And Schools Together.*

**Tidewell Hospice Palliative Care. .... (941) 923-5822 (Sarasota office)**

5955 Rand Blvd., Sarasota, FL 34238

**(941) 496-4611 (Venice office)**

**(941) 627-0848 (Port Charlotte office)**

*Special services are available for children with a life limiting disease and their families as well as for children in families where someone else is ill. The children's program also provides support for children in bereavement.*

**Jewish Family & Children's Services.....(941) 366-2224**  
2688 Fruitville Road, Sarasota, FL 34237

**South County – Venice Office.....(941) 492-4717**

*Provides counseling for individuals, couples and families of all ages as well as support groups. Various support groups facilitated by professionals on subjects such as Anger Management, Bereavement, Men's Group, Women's Group, and others.*

# **VII. Professional Reference Materials**

# HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH LOSS, DEATH, AND GRIEF

## Tips for Teachers and Parents

*National Association of School Psychologists*

### Expressions of Grief

Talking to children about death must be geared to their developmental level, respectful of their cultural norms, and sensitive to their capacity to understand the situation. Children will be aware of the reactions of significant adults as they interpret and react to information about death and tragedy. In fact, for primary grade children, adult reactions will play an especially important role in shaping their perceptions of the situation. The range of reactions that children display in response to the death of significant others may include:

- ***Emotional shock*** and at times an apparent lack of feelings, which serve to help the child detach from the pain of the moment;
- ***Regressive (immature) behaviors***, such as needing to be rocked or held, difficulty separating from parents or significant others, needing to sleep in parent's bed or an apparent difficulty completing tasks well within the child's ability level;
- ***Explosive emotions and acting out behavior*** that reflect the child's internal feelings of anger, terror, frustration and helplessness. Acting out may reflect insecurity and a way to seek control over a situation for which they have little or no control;
- ***Asking the same questions over and over***, not because they do not understand the facts, but rather because the information is so hard to believe or accept. Repeated questions can help listeners determine if the child is responding to misinformation or the real trauma of the event.

### Helping Children Cope

The following tips will help teachers, parents, and other caregivers support children who have experienced the loss of parents, friends, or loved ones. Some of these recommendations come from Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado.

- ***Allow children to be the teachers about their grief experiences:*** Give children the opportunity to tell their story and be a good listener.
- ***Don't assume that every child in a certain age group understands death in the same way or with the same feelings:*** All children are different and their view of the world is unique and shaped by different experiences. (Developmental information is provided below.)
- ***Grieving is a process, not an event:*** Parents and schools need to allow adequate time for each child to grieve in the manner that works for that child. Pressing children to resume "normal" activities without the chance to deal with their emotional pain may prompt additional problems or negative reactions.

- ***Don't lie or tell half-truths to children about the tragic event:*** Children are often bright and sensitive. They will see through false information and wonder why you do not trust them with the truth. Lies do not help the child through the healing process or help develop effective coping strategies for life's future tragedies or losses.
- ***Help all children, regardless of age, to understand loss and death:*** Give the child information at the level that he/she can understand. Allow the child to guide adults as to the need for more information or clarification of the information presented. Loss and death are both part of the cycle of life that children need to understand.
- ***Encourage children to ask questions about loss and death:*** Adults need to be less anxious about not knowing all the answers. Treat questions with respect and a willingness to help the child find his or her own answers.
- ***Don't assume that children always grieve in an orderly or predictable way:*** We all grieve in different ways and there is no one "correct" way for people to move through the grieving process.
- ***Let children know that you really want to understand what they are feeling or what they need:*** Sometimes children are upset but they cannot tell you what will be helpful. Giving them the time and encouragement to share their feelings with you may enable them to sort out their feelings.
- ***Children will need long-lasting support:*** The more losses the child or adolescent suffers, the more difficult it will be to recover. This is especially true if they have lost a parent who was their major source of support. Try to develop multiple supports for children who suffer significant losses.
- ***Keep in mind that grief work is hard:*** It is hard work for adults and hard for children as well.
- ***Understand that grief work is complicated:*** Deaths that result from a terrorist act or war can bring forth many issues that are difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend. Grieving may also be complicated by a need for vengeance or justice and by the lack of resolution of the current situation: the conflict may continue and the nation may still feel at risk. The sudden or violent nature of the death or the fact that some individuals may be considered missing rather than dead can further complicate the grieving process.
- ***Be aware of your own need to grieve:*** Focusing on the children in your care is important, but not at the expense of your emotional needs. Adults who have lost a loved one will be far more able to help children work through their grief if they get help themselves. For some families, it may be important to seek family grief counseling, as well as individual sources of support.

## Developmental Phases in Understanding Death

It is important to recognize that all children are unique in their understanding of death and dying. This understanding depends on their developmental level, cognitive skills, personality characteristics, religious or spiritual beliefs, teachings by parents and significant others, input from the media, and previous experiences with death. Nonetheless, there are some general considerations that will be helpful in understanding how children and adolescents experience and deal with death.

- **Infants and Toddlers:** The youngest children may perceive that adults are sad, but have no real understanding of the meaning or significance of death.
- **Preschoolers:** Young children may deny death as a formal event and may see death as reversible. They may interpret death as a separation, not a permanent condition. Preschool and even early elementary children may link certain events and magical thinking with the causes of death. For instance, as a result of the World Trade Center disaster, some children may imagine that going into tall buildings may cause someone's death.
- **Early Elementary School:** Children at this age (approximately 5-9) start to comprehend the finality of death. They begin to understand that certain circumstances may result in death. They can see that, if large planes crash into buildings, people in the planes and buildings will be killed. In case of war images, young children may not be able to differentiate between what they see on television, and what might happen in their own neighborhood. However, they may over-generalize, particularly at ages 5-6—if jet planes don't fly, then people don't die. At this age, death is perceived as something that happens to others, not to oneself or one's family.
- **Middle School:** Children at this level have the cognitive understanding to comprehend death as a final event that results in the cessation of all bodily functions. They may not fully grasp the abstract concepts discussed by adults or on the TV news but are likely to be guided in their thinking by a concrete understanding of justice. They may experience a variety of feelings and emotions, and their expressions may include acting out or self-injurious behaviors as a means of coping with their anger, vengeance and despair.
- **High School:** Most teens will fully grasp the meaning of death in circumstances such as an automobile accident, illness and even the World Trade Center or Pentagon disasters. They may seek out friends and family for comfort or they may withdraw to deal with their grief. Teens (as well as some younger children) with a history of depression, suicidal behavior and chemical dependency are at particular risk for prolonged and serious grief reactions and may need more careful attention from home and school during these difficult times.

## **Tips for Children and Teens With Grieving Friends and Classmates**

Seeing a friend try to cope with a loss may scare or upset children who have had little or no experience with death and grieving. Following are some suggestions teachers and parents can provide to children and youth to deal with this “secondary” loss.

- Particularly with younger children, it will be important to help clarify their understanding of death. See tips above under “helping children cope.”
- Seeing their classmates’ reactions to loss may bring about some fears of losing their own parents or siblings, particularly for students who have family in the military or other risk related professions. Children need reassurance from caregivers and teachers that their own families are safe. For children who have experienced their own loss (previous death of a parent, grandparent, sibling), observing the grief of a friend can bring back painful memories. These children are at greater risk for developing more serious stress reactions and should be given extra support as needed.
- Children (and many adults) need help in communicating condolence or comfort messages. Provide children with age-appropriate guidance for supporting their peers. Help them decide what to say (e.g., “Steve, I am so sorry about your father. I know you will miss him very much. Let me know if I can help you with your paper route...”) and what to expect (see “expressions of grief” above).
- Help children anticipate some changes in friends’ behavior. It is important that children understand that their grieving friends may act differently, may withdraw from their friends for a while, might seem angry or very sad, etc., but that this does not mean a lasting change in their relationship.
- Explain to children that their “regular” friendship may be an important source of support for friends and classmates. Even normal social activities such as inviting a friend over to play, going to the park, playing sports, watching a movie, or a trip to the mall may offer a much needed distraction and sense of connection and normalcy.
- Children need to have some options for providing support—it will help them deal with their fears and concerns if they have some concrete actions that they can take to help. Suggest making cards, drawings, helping with chores or homework, etc. Older teens might offer to help the family with some shopping, cleaning, errands, etc., or with babysitting for younger children.
- Encourage children who are worried about a friend to talk to a caring adult. This can help alleviate their own concern or potential sense of responsibility for making their friend feel better. Children may also share important information about a friend who is at risk of more serious grief reactions.
- Parents and teachers need to be alert to children in their care who may be reacting to a friend’s loss of a loved one. These children will need some extra support to help them deal with the sense of frustration and helplessness that many people are feeling at this time.

## Resources for Grieving and Traumatized Children

At times of severe stress, such as the trauma of war or terrorist attacks, both children and adults need extra support. Children who are physically and emotionally closest to this tragedy may very well experience the most dramatic feelings of fear, anxiety and loss. They may have personally lost a loved one or know of friends and schoolmates who have been devastated by these treacherous acts. Adults need to carefully observe these children for signs of traumatic stress, depression or even suicidal thinking, and seek professional help when necessary.

Resources to help you identify symptoms of severe stress and grief reactions are available at the National Association of School Psychologists website—[www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org). See also:

### For Caregivers

- Deaton, R.L. & Berkan, W.A. (1995). *Planning and managing death issues in the schools: A handbook*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Mister Rogers Website: [www.misterrogers.org](http://www.misterrogers.org) (see booklet on Grieving for children 4-10 years)
- Webb, N.B. (1993). *Helping bereaved children: A handbook for practitioners*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Wolfelt, A. (1983). *Helping children cope with grief*. Bristol, PA: Accelerated Development.
- Wolfelt, A (1997). *Healing the bereaved child: Grief gardening, growth through grief and other touchstones for caregivers*. Ft. Collins, CO: Companion.
- Worden, J.W. (1996). *Children and grief: When a parent dies*. New York: Guilford Press
- Helping Children Cope With Death, The Dougy Center for Grieving Children, [www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org).

### For Children

- Gootman, M.E. (1994). *When a friend dies: A book for teens about grieving and healing*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing.
- Greenlee, S. (1992). *When someone dies*. Atlanta: Peachtree Publishing. (Ages 9-12).
- Wolfelt, A. (2001). *Healing your grieving heart for kids*. Ft. Collins, CO: Companion. (See also similar titles for teens and adults)

## **Three Myths of Children's Grief**

### **Myth 1. Children Don't Grieve**

1. Children grieve all losses in spurts, several times a day.
2. They re-grieve throughout all developmental stages.
3. Children don't know they're grieving or understand their feelings.

### **Myth 2. Children Experience Few Losses**

1. Children experiences losses on a daily basis:
  - At School: sports, grades competitions, self-esteem, relationships
  - At Home: control, understanding, dysfunctional family losses
2. 1 of 7 loses a parent to death before age 10

### **Myth 3. Childhood is the Happiest Time of One's Life**

1. A child will go through 6 developmental stages between birth and age 21.
2. Each stage is marked by a period of continuous change in cognition, feelings, and physical development.
3. Almost every area of life through each developmental stage is totally controlled by circumstances outside of the influence of the child.

## **Web Sites**

[www.NASPOonline.org](http://www.NASPOonline.org)

[www.nea.org](http://www.nea.org)

[www.connectforkids.org](http://www.connectforkids.org)

[www.childrensgrief.net](http://www.childrensgrief.net)

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