



Student's Reaction:

The initial reaction to a crisis is one of shock, disbelief and denial. This is usually followed by a state of intense emotional turmoil during which students may express fear, anger, rage, confusion and sorrow. They may want to run home or out of the classroom. This is followed by exhaustion.

By the time you receive this brochure, your child has likely been informed of the tragedy and has already experienced some aspects of the initial reaction. What you will probably observe now are the long term reactions to the crisis. These will vary somewhat depending on the age of the student.

Children react differently depending on their age. Younger children, who were not close to the person(s) involved in the tragedy, are less likely to be affected. However, any fears or questions that they have need to be addressed.

Elementary School Age - At this age, children are trying to tackle the concept of life and death. They are often fascinated by the rituals surrounding the tragedy and may become immersed in the details of arrangements. They are beginning to understand the finality of death.

They often believe that they could have prevented the tragedy from occurring and may believe that they can cause death or other bad things by wishful thinking. In these cases, their sense of guilt and responsibility have to be addressed. They will often engage in rescue play and fantasy. Sleep disturbances, imagined illness, school avoidance, personality change and acting out may occur in reaction to the tragedy.

Parent/Guardian's Guide

Elementary Students' Reaction to Loss & Tragedy



Services Being Provided

Evaluation of Students' Needs: Trained professionals may meet with your child to determine the most appropriate intervention for him/her.

If your child has found out about the tragedy at school, support staff will be on hand to support them, explain the crisis and ensure safety.

As part of the district's crisis response plan, all students affected by a tragedy will have an opportunity to discuss their reactions and feelings about this event once the initial shock has worn off.

This is done in an age-appropriate way. Younger children are encouraged to express themselves in art and play. Stories about coping with loss may be read to them and questions answered. Participation in discussions is encouraged but is voluntary in nature.

Individual Debriefing/Counselling - A number of trained counsellors will be available to provide individual debriefing/counselling for students who want to talk to someone individually. The focus of the counselling is on the crisis event and the student's reaction to it.

Follow-up - When necessary, selected groups of students may meet as a group on a number of occasions to assist them in dealing with their grief. Additionally, teachers have been encouraged to allow for special activities and discussions in class. The curriculum may be adjusted for a short time during the grieving period. Parents/guardians will be contacted for students who the school feels are particularly at risk.

If you have concerns about your child's reaction, please contact your child's teacher and/or guidance counsellor. Please contact the school if you do not want your child to receive this type of service.

Every child affected by a tragedy is going to display some emotional upset and needs to go through the grieving process in order to accept the loss. For most students, all that is needed is time, understanding and support from teachers and parents. Some students are more at risk than others and may require additional individual support to assist them in coping. The following students should be considered at possible greater risk:

- close friends and relatives of person(s) involved
- eye witnesses
- those who have had recent losses (deaths, family break-up)
- students experiencing depression
- socially isolated students
- those who were showing signs of poor coping before the event



Tips for Helping School-Age Children After a Tragic Event

Reactions	Responses	Examples of Things to do and Say
Feeling overwhelmed by their feelings	Provide a safe place for them to express their fears, anger, sadness, etc. Allow children to cry or be sad. Don't expect them to be brave or tough.	"When bad things happen to people we care about, we can have some really strong feelings, like being sad. Would you like to sit here with a blanket until you're feeling better?"
Feelings of being responsible: School-age children may have concerns that they were somehow at fault, or should have been able to change what happened. They may hesitate to voice their concerns in front of others.	Provide opportunities for children to voice their concerns to you. Offer reassurance and tell them why it is not their fault.	"After something like this happens, a lot of kids think "What could I have done differently?" or "I should have been able to do something." That doesn't mean that they were at fault."
Repeatedly talking about the event	Allow the child to talk and act out these reactions. Let them know that this is normal. Encourage positive problem-solving in play, drawing, or writing.	"I noticed that you're drawing a lot of pictures of what happened. Did you know that a lot of kids do that? It might be a good idea to draw pictures about happy times that you can remember, too."
Sleep problems (including bad dreams, fear of sleeping alone, demanding to sleep with parents)	Let your child tell you about the bad dream. Explain that bad dreams are normal and they will go away. Do not ask the child to go into too many details of the bad dream.	"That was a scary dream. Let's think about good things you can dream about I'll rub your back until you fall asleep."
Somatic Complaints (headaches, stomach aches, muscle aches for which there seem to be no reason)	Find out if there is a medical reason. If not, provide comfort and reassurance that this is normal. Be matter-of-fact with your child; giving these non-medical complaints too much attention may increase them.	Make sure the child gets enough sleep, eats well, drinks plenty of water, and gets enough exercise. "How about sitting over there? When you feel better, let me know and we can play cards."
Altered behaviour (unusually aggressive or restless)	Encourage your child to engage in recreational activities and exercise as an outlet for feelings of frustration.	"It must be hard to feel so angry. How about if we take a walk? Sometimes getting our bodies moving helps with strong feelings."