



Connecting with Families

Take-Home Message

Teachers and schools play a vital role when they reach out proactively to make contact with students' families after a death. They can provide information, find out how students are doing, offer advice and assistance, and partner with families to provide support over time.

Note: In this handout, "parents" refers to those functioning as students' primary caregivers. This might include grandparents, other family members, or guardians.

Make Contact

Schools communicate regularly with families in a variety of ways and for many reasons. It is appropriate for schools to initiate contact with students' families after a death occurs. Parents may be overwhelmed by events and may not think of their children's school as a resource for information, guidance, and support. Proactive outreach can also help set the stage for planning and providing support for students when they return to school.

Initially, it's best to meet with families in person if possible. If not, phone contact may be a good start. For first contact, email and text messaging may be seen as impersonal and may not be able to fully convey the nuances of the school's intentions. Later, these may be practical ways to make contact with busy and overwhelmed parents.

Normalize your outreach—let students and families know these communications and offers of support are provided to all families after students experience a significant loss.

Goals for Communication With Families

1. Express condolences on behalf of the school community. Let the family know the professional resources of the school are available.
2. Offer advice on how to support grieving children. Parents may appreciate guidance on what to say to their children about the death. School personnel are often involved early enough to provide advice on funeral attendance (see Funeral Attendance).
3. Remind parents of their critical role in supporting children at this time.

Let parents know their children may be worried about them, and are looking to them for guidance on how to cope. You may be able to equip the family with needed information and advice that allows them to better fulfill this role.

4. Assist with transition of the student back to school. Most children are likely to experience at least some temporary learning challenges after the death of a close family member or friend. Help the family plan a timely return to school. Help prepare the student, their classmates (as appropriate), and school personnel for the student's return.
5. Seek feedback from parents about their children. How are the children coping? What strategies do parents think will be helpful for school personnel in providing support over time? Parents can provide useful insights about what is, and is not, likely to work.
6. Offer supportive resources in the school and information about community resources that may be of help to everyone in the family (mental health professionals, bereavement support groups). Suggest the family check with their pediatrician or other health-care provider for guidance and referrals. Help them think through other supports in their extended families and communities.
7. Identify and anticipate potential challenges. Families may need practical support (transportation, childcare). Schools can sometimes identify resources to address practical needs. Parents can often identify potential trigger situations for their children (significant dates, upcoming transitions).
8. Partner with families to support children over time. Let parents know they are helping the teacher and school better support their children—academically and emotionally—by providing useful information and valuable insight.
9. Provide appropriate reassurance and positive feedback. Identify ways students and families are already coping effectively. Families may feel both overwhelmed and unfamiliar with grief. They may not recognize the ways they are coping well because the children are still upset.

Some Families Decline Assistance

Recognize that some families will decline offers to meet, speak, or receive assistance—especially at first. Re-extend the invitation occasionally and keep the door open, should the family become ready at a later time.

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For more information on supporting grieving students, refer to *The Grieving Student: A Teacher's Guide* by David Schonfeld and Marcia Quackenbush.

