



Social Media

Take-Home Message

Social media is a powerful influence in young people's lives. When a death occurs in the school community, information can be passed quickly among students—sometimes accurate, sometimes not. Grieving students can obtain considerable support from peers and school through social media. It is important for school professionals to consider how to best adapt the use of social media when a death has occurred, and understand how to use it optimally.

Defining Social Media

In this handout, we define social media broadly, to include technology such as texting, instant messaging, emails, online gaming, meet-ups, Skype, and similar services.

Opportunities and Benefits

Adults sometimes feel uncomfortable with the use of social media, especially when dealing with sensitive topics such as bereavement. For most children and adolescents, however, social media is a familiar and comfortable way to communicate. For grieving children, social media offers unique and powerful ways to gain support and check in with peers.

In fact, children often choose social media and technology as preferred methods of communication. Not only is it easier to text a friend, in many cases it is socially more appropriate. A text is delivered immediately, but recipients can consider the message privately. They can choose when and where to read it, then take time to consider a response. They do not need to worry about facial expressions or body language sending unintended messages.

For example, condolences or questions posed in person or by phone place immediate expectations on the recipient.



By contrast, a grieving child might read a message, cry privately, then send a reply when feeling more composed.

A child who has lost a parent after a lengthy illness might post a notice on a social media site at the time of death and quickly receive expressions of condolence. The child can communicate what has happened without having to contact every friend individually and repeat a difficult story. These communications can help alleviate feelings of awkwardness when the child returns to school.

The sense of anonymity and privacy users may feel with social media can facilitate the sharing of personal and sensitive information. Children may discuss feelings, wishes, and thoughts that are difficult to communicate face-to-face, but are important to express while grieving.

Challenges and Cautions

As much as social media can provide powerful and positive support to a grieving child, this form of social interaction is not the same as having a heartfelt conversation with a friend. It does not offer the same kind of support as someone who sits with you while you are crying or gives you a hug. Without some balance of personal interactions and real-world contacts, reliance on social media risks increasing the sense of social isolation often felt by grieving children.

Additionally, when people meet face-to-face, there is a social consciousness present. They are less likely to say things that are hurtful, insensitive, or inappropriate. In the absence of these social filters, harmful statements and conversations sometimes occur.

School Notifications

Social media and text messages are delivered at all times of the day, anywhere there is a signal. Messages about the death of a student during school hours are often received first by students via their phones. Teachers may not have advance preparation. They may find themselves responding to student reactions without having a chance to confirm the accuracy of the information or receiving guidance about what to say. The school's mental health staff may not be immediately available to provide support.

Similarly, if the death of someone in the school community occurs over the weekend or during a holiday, students often learn of the event quickly through social media. They may return to school with questions, fears, grief, or confusion. Rumors or inappropriate information may exacerbate their reactions.

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While this immediacy of information sharing can seem intrusive, it is a simple reality of today's world. Adults have little meaningful control over communication among children, even in the absence of social media.

This is an excellent reason for teachers to prepare proactively to deal with a death in the school community.

Friends and “Friends”

Social media connects children with a wider social network. It can simulate being personally present as an event occurs in real time, even if it is at a distant location. This can be exciting, but when a death or tragedy is involved, the sense of personal involvement can be upsetting and unsettling.

Adults in children's lives may not even know of these indirect but often powerful experiences. They may not understand the impact they have on children. The death of a “friend” known to the child only through online gaming or social media may still represent a significant loss.

The Broader School Community

Social media can be a highly effective means to rapidly disseminate information to the school community as a whole. When appropriate, this outreach can include recent graduates who may have known the person who died, but are now living in other locations for work or college. Young people in new social situations may lack the sense of shared experience and support they would have previously obtained from peers and family.

Social media may also offer a way to reach out to grieving families or students in the initial period after a death, if the family is not yet ready to accept calls or visitors.

Information being shared among students and staff through social media can offer insight into how people are responding to a death. This can help inform plans to provide support to the community. Schools need to develop policies concerning the monitoring of social media. It is important to find a balance that precludes infringing on privacy but allows

information expressed through social media to be acted on if necessary to preserve safety—for example, if an individual is expressing suicidal intentions.

Suitable for Public Distribution

Any information posted through social media can easily be forwarded and re-posted repeatedly. It is essential that all content be suitable for public distribution. This may encompass individuals and groups well beyond the school community, including the media.

Potentially sensitive messages should be reviewed, not only by an administrator and/or someone overseeing public relations, but also by a mental health professional in the school who may be attuned to the sensitivities of those who are grieving.

Commemoration and Memorialization

Increasingly, social media is being used to facilitate commemoration and memorialization efforts. This can be especially useful when children travel and create social networks that they maintain through social media and online communication.

For example, after the death of a student who had recently participated in an international exchange program, an online memorial service allowed children from both countries to share memories and stories.

Perform a Social Media Policy Audit

Social media is a powerful tool to share accurate and timely information as well as socially appropriate messages after a death has occurred. Schools should review policies related to the use of social media with an eye to how these might best support grieving students and the broader school community. Maintaining a strong social media presence helps schools stay prepared to support students, staff, and families.

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

