

Mini-Articles: Connecting with Families

9 Goals for Communicating with Grieving Families

School professionals have a vital role to play providing support to grieving students and their families. It is important to reach out and make contact with families after a death. An in-person or telephone contact are usually preferred but an e-mail may also be appropriate if the family does not respond to outreach attempts.

Here are 9 goals for communicating with grieving families:

1. Express condolences on behalf of the school community.
2. Offer suggestions and advice on how to support grieving children.
3. Remind parents or other guardians of their critical role supporting children at this time.
4. Assist with students' transition back to school.
5. Seek feedback about how children are doing.
6. Offer supportive resources in school and community.
7. Identify and anticipate potential challenges.
8. Partner with families to support children over time.
9. Provide appropriate reassurance and positive feedback.

You can find more information about these goals, along with additional suggestions about communicating with families, at the website of the [*Coalition to Support Grieving Students*](#). The website's materials are designed specifically for school professionals. Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

School Staff Play a Special Role with Bereaved Families

When children experience the death of a family member or close friend, school staff can play a unique and important role for their families.

For example:

- *Schools are familiar and school staff are trusted.* The ongoing communication between schools and families often allows teachers to be trusted partners from the outset.
- *Families are usually looking for guidance.* Bereavement is challenging for every family, and most parents and guardians struggle with what to say and do. They welcome suggestions from someone who knows and cares about their child.
- *School staff may have knowledge other providers do not have.* School staff spend much more time with children than many other providers. They will have more opportunities to observe how children are coping socially, emotionally and academically.
- *The behavior school staff observe at school may not be the same as that exhibited at home.* Sometimes children express frustration or sadness at school, but cover these feelings up at home to protect their parents or guardians.
- *School staff can suggest resources for the family.* School staff can alert the family about community bereavement or mental health services that families may not be aware of.

The [*Coalition to Support Grieving Students*](#) (of which our organization is a member) offers more information and guidance about communicating with bereaved families. The materials at their website are designed specifically for school professionals.

What to Tell Parents: Guidance for Bereaved Families

School professionals have a vital role to play providing support to grieving students and their families. It is important to reach out and make contact with families after a death. Here are some messages to communicate to parents or guardians.

1. *The role of families is essential.* Your child looks to you more than anyone else for information and guidance on how to cope with this loss.
2. *Your child is concerned about you.* Children understand that death is distressing to their parents/guardians. They want to know how you are coping. They also want honest reassurance that you are safe and healthy.
3. *Your child is concerned about himself/herself.* Especially after the death of a parent, children worry about who will take care of them if their other parent (or current guardian) also dies.
4. *Honesty is essential.* Children need to understand the truth about the death of a loved one. Direct, clear language is best, using terms such as “died” and “dead,” rather than confusing euphemisms such as “asleep” or “at peace.”

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The Coalition to Support Grieving Students was convened by the New York Life Foundation, a pioneering advocate for the cause of childhood bereavement, and the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, which is led by pediatrician and childhood bereavement expert David J. Schonfeld, M.D. The Coalition has worked with Scholastic Inc., a long-standing supporter of teachers and kids, to create grievingstudents.org, a groundbreaking, practitioner-oriented website designed to provide educators with the information, insights, and practical advice they need to better understand and meet the needs of the millions of grieving kids in America’s classrooms.