

Helping Children Cope with Tragic Illness

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The serious and life-threatening illness of a teacher always shocks a community. Most people feel a mix of disbelief and profound sorrow. How could this happen, we wonder. It's so unfair. And adults feel concern for children. Parents and teachers want to be helpful, but also have to manage their own reactions. They may find themselves remembering other traumatic illnesses among family and friends. They worry about saying too much or too little, about not having enough information, about saying the wrong thing. Though there is no perfect approach, here are points that can help when talking with children:

1. Don't assume that all children feel what you feel. They react differently depending on their closeness to the child who is ill, and their own personalities. Some may be very upset, others not. Some may have many questions, others none. Showing little reaction does not automatically mean a person is hiding his or her feelings.

2. Children are remarkably resilient. Some may become quite upset at first, but given a chance to express what they feel, they usually recover. It almost never helps to keep asking them extensive, probing questions. It does help to give them simple, direct information, to respond to their questions, and to listen when they want to talk.

3. If you receive a difficult question and you're not sure how to answer, it is often helpful to inquire further. You can say, "What made you think of that?" or "Can you tell me what you were thinking about?" A better understanding of these issues will make it easier for you to respond.

4. You needn't be perfect. There may be questions you can't answer. It is fine to say, "I don't know," and to ask, "What have you heard?" or, "Did you have an idea about that?" Sometimes, being honest with children will cause adults to become emotional. If you should become sad or even tearful when talking with children, this is fine. It is often very helpful for children to see parents and teachers expressing and dealing with strong feelings when it comes to grief and loss.

In the end, parents and teachers will rarely go wrong by relying on what is most basic between them and the children—caring and connection. At these times, your presence—just being with the kids, just being available to them, listening to them, sharing with them—can really help them cope.

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