

Talking About & Coping With Grief and Loss

1. ***Model calm and control.*** Children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives. It is important to avoid appearing anxious or frightened.
2. ***Let children know it is okay to feel upset.*** Explain that all feelings are OK when a tragedy like this occurs. Let children talk about their feelings and help put them into perspective. Even anger is OK, but children may need help and patience from adults to assist them in expressing these feelings appropriately.
3. ***Observe children's emotional state.*** Depending on their age, children may not express their concerns verbally. Children will express their emotions differently. There is no right or wrong way to feel or express grief or fear. Signs of heightened anxiety include:
 - Refusing to go to school and excessive “clinging”
 - Sleep disturbances such as nightmares, screaming during sleep or bedwetting
 - Irritability and loss concentration
 - Increased agitation
 - Being easily startled and jumpy
 - New or unusual behavior problems
 - Physical complaints for which a physical cause cannot be found
 - Withdrawal from family and friends
 - Sadness, listlessness or decreased activity
 - Preoccupation with death or violence
4. ***Look for children at greater risk.*** Children who have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss suffer from depression or other mental illness, or with special needs, maybe at greater risk for severe reactions than others. Be particularly observant for those who may be at risk of suicide. Seek the help of mental health professionals if you are at all concerned.
5. ***Tell children the truth.*** Don't try to pretend the event has not occurred or that it is not serious. Children are smart. They will be more worried if they think you are too afraid to tell them what is happening.
6. ***Stick to the facts.*** Don't embellish or speculate about what has happened. Don't dwell on the scale or scope of the tragedy, particularly with young children.

7. **Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate.**

- **Early elementary school** children need brief simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that daily structures of their lives will not change.
- **Upper elementary and early middle school** children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what is being to keep them safe. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy.
- **Upper middle school and high school** students will have strong and varying opinions about the causes of violence and threats to safety in society. They will share concrete suggestions about how to make society safer and how to prevent tragedies. They will be more committed to doing something to help the victims and affected community.
- **For all children, encourage them to verbalize their thoughts and feelings. Be a good listener!**

8. **Monitor your own stress level.** Don't ignore your feelings of anxiety, grief and anger. Talking to friends, family members, religious leaders and mental health counselors can help. It is OK to let your children know that you are sad, but that you believe things will get better. You will be better able to support your children if you can express your own emotions in a productive manner. Get appropriate sleep, nutrition and exercise.

*--Adapted from the National Association of School Psychologists
by the Central York School District Student Services Team*

Resources Available for More Information/Assistance

The Central York School District Student Services team recommends the following additional resources/Internet links to any adults or children seeking additional information or assistance with coping during this time.

- **Central York School District Website:**
 - Click on the “Parents” tab on the top of the screen to access a link to resources for coping with grief and loss.
 - Click on the “Schools” tab to access your child’s school, then select “Guidance and Counseling” or “School Social Worker” links to contact your school guidance counselors or social workers or view more resources.

- **Olivia’s House** – A Grief and Loss Center for Children, www.oliviashouse.org or (717) 699-1133

- **The Dougy Center** – The National Center for Grieving Children & Families, www.dougy.org

- **WellSpan Behavior Health** – (717) 812-4200

- **Family-Child Resources** – (717) 757-1227