

How to Lead a Discussion with Grieving Students

1. **A teacher can have help.** A teacher must be comfortable enough with the issues being discussed in order to lead a discussion. If a teacher is not comfortable, then ask for help from the counselor/crisis team.
2. **A circle.** Sit in a comfortable way. A circle is best to include all members in the discussion. Move the desks, sit on the floor, or in a comfortable location in the classroom.
3. **“I pass” rule.** A child can pass the opportunity to share their feelings or thoughts at any time. In this way, we can express to the child that we trust him/her to know when he/she is ready to share grief.
4. **A talking stick.** Use a special object as your “Talking Stick.” It can be a stuffed animal, a special rock, or a traditional Native American Talking Stick with feathers tied to it. The one holding the “Talking Stick” is the only one to speak at a time.
5. **Answer questions truthfully and if you do not know the answer, say so. Offer to find out answers and report back if possible.**
6. **Avoid asking too many questions.** When in discussion groups, remember that too many questions can often be overwhelming. Listen carefully when a child shares an experience and be willing to simply reflect their statements. This often gives the children a sense of what they are feeling and inspires them to proceed at their own pace.
7. **Avoid interpretations.** If a child is indirect or is using symbols in order to express him/herself, it is because direct communication is too painful. Communicate with a child through the information and the symbols that are offered.
8. **Avoid judgment.** Referring to a child’s sharing as either “good” or “bad” can encourage a child to seek adult approval while discouraging the child to trust his/her own way of expressing grief. You can say “thank you” for their sharing.
9. **Allow for silence and tears.**
10. **Allow for laughter and joking.** Good memories of the person who dies may also arise.
11. **Share your own feelings.** You can model grief for students by sharing your own feelings, but seek your support from other adults.

12. **Encourage other support.** After a sharing time, it is important to close with appreciation for what has been shared and a discussion about who the child can talk to when they need support. Offer the option of a support room, if available, during the school day.
13. **Bears or Play-Doh.** It helps younger students to talk about difficult issues if they can hold a stuffed animal or manipulate some Play-Doh.
14. **Warn of possible feelings.** Inform students that they may experience wide ranges of feelings (anger, sadness, laughter) from one moment to the next. That is okay, and is normal.
15. **Allow for curiosity.** The discussion may include curiosity about what occurred, especially for older students. They may wish to share memories of the person who died, regrets (assure them they did their best), and wishes to memorialize the person. Assist them in developing ways they can personally and collectively memorialize the person who died.

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