

## Guidelines for Staff dealing with Traumatic Events

School staff are often called upon to help children deal with grief and stress in a supportive and compassionate way. The best way to help students is to use your good judgement and empathy. The following suggestions may help you understand what some students may be experiencing and give you supportive ways to respond.

- Acknowledge and accept that the tragedy may trigger an emotional response in you as well as your students. It's always difficult to remember and accept that there are events in our lives that can't be predicted or controlled. Recognizing your own feelings will enable you to be more supportive of your students.
- Be aware of the potential impact of "media overload"—both from traditional media and the internet. Especially in middle and secondary schools, talk to your students about the importance of limiting their exposure to this coverage.
- If students ask questions, listen carefully to what they are saying and respond in as objective a way as possible. If you don't know an answer, don't be afraid to say so.
- Accept students' feelings. Allow them to express their remembrances, thoughts and fears—they are not good or bad, right or wrong, they're just there. Emphasize that each person is entitled to his or her own feelings. It's important that students have an opportunity to express their concerns and to feel that adults are taking those concerns seriously.
- Do whatever is necessary to reassure students that your school is a safe place—for example, review the code of conduct.
- If students express fears or concerns, respond in the most reassuring way possible.
- Maintain routines as much as possible, but understand the need for flexibility if students need to talk or express their concerns.
- Be vigilant regarding at-risk students, such as those who have:
  - experienced a recent death in the family
  - recently come from a country where they have experienced armed conflict
  - a history of depression, anxiety disorders or other traumas
  - have siblings away from home at universities or colleges

- People respond in different ways to tragic events or the recollection of these events. For example, you may notice the following types of reactions among your students:
  - preoccupation with violence and death
  - physical complaints like stomach aches and headaches
  - anxiety, sadness, withdrawal
  - aggression during play
  - sensitivity to loud noises
  - mood changes
  - difficulty concentrating
- Should you become aware of students who continue to experience significant distress—for example, preoccupation with the tragedy—you may wish to ask your principal to consult with your school social worker or psycho-educational consultant or regarding further assistance for the student.
- If possible, try to direct students toward something constructive they can do.
- Ask for help. Social workers, psychologists and members of the Critical Incident Response Team are available to the school. Consult with your principal if you wish to speak with someone.