

10

TIPS FOR CREATING A SAFE CLASSROOM

Creating a safe classroom starts with the person in charge. If a teacher creates a safe space for students to share openly about the adversity and challenges they face then this will help students feel comfortable talking about the topic of death and grief. These tips can be used for a variety of purposes including after a death has occurred in the community. However, they will be most effective when implemented in advance by creating a culture of safety and trust.

1 BE ATTUNED TO CLASSROOM DYNAMICS

Every classroom and school has its own culture and dynamic. It is important to be attentive to the school environment and the classroom dynamic. How do the students interact with each other as a group, what are the values the school promotes, and who is left on the sidelines? Identify day-to-day activities within the school and classroom that will promote and/or inhibit healthy coping during a time of crisis or adversity. Consistently work on strengthening a sense of community by acknowledging those things students have in common.

2 FACILITATE SOCIAL NETWORKS

A child needs the support, acceptance, and understanding of peers.¹ Identify a child's social network at school. If s/he doesn't have many friends, consider making introductions to other kids who have experienced adversity. Kids want to help each other, but don't always have the tools to be effective. Equip students with the resources they need to support a friend, ask for help, and show kindness and inclusivity.

3 MODEL EMPATHY

Luckily, empathy is not as foreign a concept to many kids these days. It's a hot topic online, on TV, and in the media. Build off what they know. Explain that empathy is imaging what the other person feels; it's an effort to understand and learn, and a deep form of kindness. Teach the Platinum Rule: treat others how they want to be treated.

4 BE OPEN

Creating an environment that is open² allows for questions and critical thinking, and will promote a healthier classroom. Unfounded assumptions, judgment, and dismissiveness impede sharing and exploration.

5 BUILD TRUST

Trust is not inherent. Trust is built by creating a safe and non-judgmental environment that allows the open expression and exploration of thoughts and feelings. When a child or teen knows they can ask questions and express feelings without judgment, they are more likely to be vulnerable and care for each other. Create classroom guidelines that foster trust, such as respect, honoring diversity, and kindness.



TIPS FOR SUPPORTING SOMEONE WHO IS GRIEVING

6 FOSTER KINDNESS

Kindness is non-judgmental, open, patient, warm, humble, and forgiving. Fostering kindness starts with adults and how they model empathy in times of crisis, grief, or uncertainty.

7 ENCOURAGE EXPLORATION

Death and grief prompt big questions. Kids want and need to explore these big questions. They need facts and information to understand and support this process. Creating a classroom that permits asking big and difficult questions helps the students become more empathic, vulnerable, and supportive.

8 EXHIBIT HONESTY

We cannot protect kids from the basic fact—and why would we—that all living things will die. The power of the classroom is in the ability for students to explore and share with peers in a similar developmental stage. Students need to honestly and openly process difficult questions and feelings. In order for children/teens to be open and honest about their processing and exploration, they need facts and honesty from adults around them.

9 ALLOW EXPRESSION

It is critical for children/teens to express their grief with others in order to make sense of what has happened. Not all children or teens can easily communicate their feelings or internal process. Art, communal projects, theater, music, and the like provide modalities for kids to express their grief in a way that feels safe for them. Left unexpressed, it can lead to outbursts, psychosomatic symptoms, challenges in school, etc.

10 FOLLOW THEIR LEAD

Kids will work hard to get their needs met. Be attuned, withhold judgment, and stay out of their way by providing a palate of modalities to facilitate the expression and exploration of grief.

¹ Ungar, M. (2008). [Resilience across cultures](#). *British Journal of Social Work*, 38(2), 218–235. Washington, T., Cryer-Coupet, Q. R., Coakley, T. M., Labban, J., Gleeson, J. P., & Shears, J.

¹ Lindon, J. (1996). [Growing Up: From Eight Years to Young Adulthood](#). London: National Children's Bureau. Pg. 3