

## PARENTS & TEACHERS CAN HELP

When a tragedy occurs, the entire school community may be affected. Such events can create feelings of helplessness and confusion. The emotional and spiritual struggles, which arise at a time such as this, can leave individuals and the school as a whole feeling quite shaken. By being aware of some of the feelings and struggles likely to occur under these circumstances, we can be in a better position to help one another and ourselves through this difficult time.

Special attention is given to the needs of our students/children during a time of tragedy. Less able to put into words their anxiety, confusion or embarrassment, students may act out their concerns in a variety of unaccustomed ways. We can all help our students cope by offering additional nurturing and support. We can talk to our students, listen to their feelings and be patient with their struggle to make sense out of a confusing situation.

Not surprisingly, adults feel anxious and helpless about talking to students about what has happened. Thoughts and questions, like the following, cross adult's minds:

- "I don't know what to say. I'm too upset to talk about it."
- "Should I just wait for my child to bring it up?"
- "Wouldn't it be better if the children just forgot about it? Thinking about things like this just make them more upset."
- "I brought it up once and they refused to talk about it. Why bring it up again?"

Yet, at a time like this, parents and teachers can help children in ways no one else can.



### WHAT HELPS CHILDREN NOW?

**BRINGING IT UP FIRST:** Parents or teachers make it easier for children to talk about an event if they bring up the topic first. This shows children that adults can face what has happened and that adults can handle their upset feelings. It is a good idea to talk about this in a place and at a time when the child is likely to feel secure and comfortable – a familiar place without interruptions.

**STARTING WITH THE KNOWN:** It is usually easier for everybody if parent(s) or teacher(s) start with what they know the child has seen, heard or already mentioned. Something simple like this can help – "I know you saw the story about \_\_\_\_\_ on television tonight..." or "You mentioned that the kids at school are upset about what they've heard about..."

**NORMALIZING FEELINGS:** Children especially feel confused by the feelings that arise at a time like this. A statement from the adult that their feelings are normal can help them express their thoughts and feelings – something like, "This is the kind of news that can upset anybody, and it usually helps to talk about it." The adult can then ask the child if they have things to say or questions about what has happened.

**LISTENING WITH ACCEPTANCE:** Listening is a way of letting children know that their feelings, whatever they are, deserve attention, respect and understanding.

**GOING AT THE CHILD'S PACE:** Encouragement to go at their own pace in talking about feelings steadies youngsters. Some want to talk about the events as soon as they hear about it -- others need to wait a while. They often ask one or two serious questions and then change the subject to something lighter, only to come back to the troublesome feelings days or weeks later. Thinking and talking about this in small steps may be as much as they can handle.

**MAKING SENSE:** It helps children to hear statements from the adult telling them that the thoughts, questions and feelings they have now are normal at a time like this. These words of acceptance help children feel calmer, more normal and able to live with their inner unsettledness.

**REPEATING:** Asking the same questions and hearing the same answers helps most children. This calms them in the same way as hearing a scary story many times – each time it becomes a little less frightening.

**BEING HONEST:** Honesty from the adults helps repair the crack in the trust of the adult world. So it is important for parents or teachers not to lie or evade real questions youngsters are asking. Answering questions clearly and matter-of-factly calms children. Often, adults do not know the answers to some of the questions children ask. At these times, it is better to say so directly, rather than guess or avoid the question. Seeing that adults can live with confusing and disturbing questions eases children's anxieties and gives them hope.

**ACCEPTING EMOTIONAL BEHAVIOR:** In the days and weeks to follow, children may be angry, anxious or upset over the recent events. They will not usually realize why they are more troubled and/or troublesome. The adult's calmness and understanding of these feelings will help children as they struggle to accept what has happened.

**KEEPING OTHER THINGS STEADY:** Keeping family and school routines as consistent, as much as possible, provides a sense of security and order at a time when children don't know what to expect.

Parents, teachers and other adults can help children face their feelings and slowly restore their faith in the adult world and themselves. This process may take weeks or months – depending on how seriously the children's trust has been damaged. During this phase, children's preoccupation with the thoughts and feelings triggered by the situation waxes and wanes. For parents, this means that just when they least expect it, the old questions and worries may pop up from their children again. With time and parental/adult understanding, most children re-establish a "wiser" but genuine sense of trust and security. If their distress and troublesome behaviors worsen or keep them from doing things other children their age do, parents can help by arranging for them to see a mental health professional.