Tips on talking with your child about death

10 tips for parents and caregivers

1. **Be direct.** Use the correct words. Say "dead." Do not use words that soft-pedal what happened. Children are not able to generalize from words such as "sleeping," "gone" or "lost." They will believe that the person is lost, sleeping or gone for a while, all of which imply that the person will come back.
2. **Do not go into detail or give long explanations.** Give the facts that are appropriate for your child's age.
3. **Ask if your child has any questions about what has happened.** If you do not know the answer to their question, do not guess or make something up. If you can, find out the answer from another source, and tell your child that you are waiting for clarification on their question.
4. **Reassure your child that they will be taken care of and provided for.** Although death is tragic, it does not happen to every child at a young age.
5. **Talk about your feelings.** If you look sad or are crying, explain why. Help your child understand that crying is part of grieving.
6. **If you choose to take your child to the funeral, be sure to prepare them for the procedures that surround this event.** Try not to let someone else take them to the funeral. You are their parent, and they look to you for support and comfort.
7. **Be prepared to repeat explanations and give the information again and again.** Asking for information over and over is developmentally appropriate.
8. **Try to get back to your everyday routines as soon as possible.**
9. **Monitor your child's behavior over time.** If you notice things don't get back to "normal" within a reasonable amount of time, get in touch with the pediatrician or school counselor.
10. **Don't forget to give hugs and kisses.** Sometimes that is all that is needed.

Signs of stress to watch for

A sudden loss like this can have an effect on students. For that reason, we hope that you will listen to your child as well as discuss with them their feelings and reactions to this tragedy. Sudden death is always painful to understand, and your child may experience signs of stress on an extended basis (longer than two weeks). These include:

- Sleep difficulties (nightmares, trouble falling asleep)
- Regressive behavior (thumb-sucking)
- Changes in appetite
- Inability to concentrate
- Absentmindedness
- Irritability
- Thoughts about death or dying
- Isolation
- Increased aggression or acting out
- Risk-taking behaviors
- Guilt
- Separation anxiety
- Fearfulness and worries
- Sensitivity to change in routine
- Use of alcohol or other drugs
- Withdrawing from normal activities and friends