

Talking about cancer

Cancer, Death and the School Community

Cancer, Death and the School Community - This information is extracted with permission from the Cancer Council booklet, 'Cancer and the School Community' © Cancer Council NSW 2011. The complete resource can be accessed via the Cancer Council website or by contacting Cancer Council 13 11 20 for a copy. www.cancercouncil.com.au



How to prepare for a cancer death

This document is an introduction to a very difficult issue – one that hopefully never affects your school community. Although cancer survival rates are increasing due to better treatments and early detection, some people with cancer do die.

When a cancer patient's prognosis is poor and it is known that they are going to die, your school community may choose to prepare people for what might happen. With the consent of the family, this might include:

- visiting the person, if desired by their family
- continuing to communicate with the person in other ways (via letters and emails, for example)
- keeping community members up to date about the prognosis
- having age-appropriate discussions about death
- informing key community members of the situation.

After the person dies, your school may choose to host a special service, organise a memorial scholarship, attend bereavement counselling or fundraise.

Action to take when someone dies

When someone in your school community dies – particularly a student – a school must decide, with the family's permission, how to inform people. It is usually better to tell students in their normal class groups or in small groups, rather than holding an all-school assembly.

The cultural diversity of your school community may also influence what you say, and how you say it. Remember, the purpose of telling students is to draw the school community together and facilitate the grieving process. Not everyone in the school community will hear the news through class meetings, so it may be necessary to use other means. For example, you can send a letter to parents, include a note in the school's newsletter or meet separately with your colleagues.

Encourage staff members who will talk to the groups of students to discuss among themselves how to share information, plan what to say to students and support each other. Staff should only be asked to speak to classes if they feel able to deal with and manage student's reactions and questions. Staff should be briefed with the following information:

- An outline of key points which clearly explains the circumstances of the death
- Some positive words of reminiscence
- Details of how the school will honour the person who has died, if appropriate
- Details of the funeral service and arrangements for attendance, if known and appropriate
- The best way to send condolences from the school and individual staff and students
- Information about support and counselling services available (see below).

»» Ways to Help

Ways you can offer support when someone in your school community dies, include:

- **Encourage the bereaved person to talk about the person who has died.** If you have a conversation, be attentive and non-judgmental.
- **Allow the person to silently reflect on their loss. Don't try to talk about other things if they aren't interested.** Let the person cry, act angrily or talk about something else.
- **Explore different ways that the students can express their emotions.** Children may want to make cards to send to the family, the school may want to create an area of remembrance or raise money for a cancer charity.
- **If you can, offer support to the family or closest friends of the person who has died.** Sending a note of sympathy is a simple but effective way to show your support.
- **Stick to school routines.** Some constancy can often be helpful for children as long as teachers are flexible about how much work they can cope with.
- **Include issues on cancer research and treatment in the curriculum where appropriate, particularly if students raise the topic.** It may need to be covered from time to time.

When a student dies

The cure rates of cancer for children and young adults have improved substantially over the past 20 years. Today about 75% of young people with cancer will be cured, and this rate is expected to increase due to improvements in treatments. However, some children do die from cancer.

The death of a child is an enormous tragedy, and it can be difficult to accept. It is important that your school community responds in a compassionate manner.

The school principal, class teacher or school counsellor should ask the family of the deceased student what the school can do to help, how the parents would like to inform staff and students (if they don't already know) and if a memorial can be organised.

If you or one of your colleagues worked closely with the student, you will feel understandably saddened when they die. You will need to take time to deal with your own feelings before talking to students. It may be helpful to attend a funeral service.

The student's classmates will react in different ways, depending on how old they are. (There is more information about how young people understand death, later in this document) Their reactions will depend on their relationship with the student and their own coping mechanisms. Classmates should be able to turn to school staff for guidance and support.

When a student's sibling dies

The loss of a student's sibling is extremely traumatic. No matter how close the young person was to their sibling, they will need time to mourn their loss. The student may have to take time away from school, and their parents will likely be occupied with making funeral and other arrangements.

You should be supportive when the student is away from school, and try to help them manage their schoolwork on their return. It is understandable that a student will be more focused on their family than on school work for a certain period of time. Sometimes it is helpful to refer a grieving child or young adult to school or other counselling services, in consultation with their family.

When a parent dies

When a parent in the school community dies, the reactions of community members can vary. If the parent was a well-known community member, people may outwardly grieve the loss. If the parent was not particularly well known in the school community, many people may be unaware of their death.

Students who know a classmate's parent has died will probably worry about their own family. They may express sympathetic sentiments, and wonder how to support their friend and what to say. Some students may attend the funeral service to support their classmate.

Other parents who are aware of the loss may reach out to help the family. Parents can help make meals, keep track of the child's homework or provide transportation to school and after-school activities.

What children understand about death

Lower primary school students - they may think death is temporary. They might realise that death means someone isn't around anymore, but they may not understand the cause of death. Children sometimes believe death was the result of their own behaviour.

Younger students have many different concerns when they think about death. If a parent or teacher dies, they might wonder who will look after them or teach them. If a peer dies, they will wonder if cancer is contagious, or if they will die, too. Children in early primary school will be very open with their questions, which may sometimes be confronting.

Upper primary school students - they will understand death is permanent, and they will know some reasons why death happens (e.g. illness or old age). They're less likely to blame themselves for the loss, but they still might blame someone else.

They will want to know the facts about death - including what happens after death. Children in this age group will be better able to articulate their feelings and act sympathetically towards others.

Support Services

There are several community services that offer support to people who are bereaved. These services include:

The Bereavement Care Centre - trained counsellors provide support to adults and children who are bereaved. Call 1300 654 556 or visit www.bereavementcare.com.au

Relationships Australia - specialist grief counselling helps people address their feelings and discuss their loss. See www.relationships.org.au or call 1300 364 277.

Cancer Council - oncology consultants can refer callers to local services or recommend support services. Call 13 11 20 or visit www.cancercouncil.com.au.

Redkite - offers a range of services for children diagnosed with cancer, their families and support networks including professional counselling, information and emotional support and Parent support groups Go to www.redkite.org.au or call 1800 REDKITE (1800 733 548)