When Helping a Grieving Child, Please:

- Listen
- Be honest. Never lie or tell half truths.
- Answer their questions. Even the hard ones.
- Give the child choices whenever possible.
- Encourage consistency and routines.
- Talk about and remember the person who died.
- Make a child’s world safe for grieving.
- Expect and allow for all kinds of emotions.
- Get out the crayons, pens, pencils, paint, chalk, Play Doh, clay.
- Run, jump, play and find other ways to release big energy and emotions.
- Be a model of healthy grief.
- Provide affection, reassurance and compassion.
- Practice patience.
- Support children even if they are in a bad mood.
- Expect some children to act younger than their age.
- Expect some children to act like little adults.
- Help the child at bedtimes. Sleep may come be difficult now.
- Encourage healthy meals and plenty of drinking of water.
- Keep parent-teacher communication open.
- Don’t force kids to talk.
- Take breaks from grief.
- Remember that “playing” is grieving for a child.
- Seek additional help if needed.
- Help children know that they are not alone in their grief and help them identify safe adults at school.
- Set limits and rules and enforce them (helps child to feel safe).
- Remember special days and anniversaries.
- Take care of your own grief and practice self-care.
- Be available to the child when they need you.

Adapted from Group Work with Adolescents After Violent Death by Alison Saffon and Managing Sudden Traumatic Loss in the Schools: NJ Adolescent Suicide Prevention Project: Maureen Underwood and Karen Dunne-Keeler

Resource sites:

http://griefspeaks.com

www.scholastic.com/childrenandgrief

Good Books:

Goodbye Mouse

Tear Soup

The Invisible Strength
Helping grieving students: Parent & teacher tips

Responding to the needs of a grieving child means “being there.” Each person must let go of their own expectations and try to understand those of the child. Listening is more important than guiding and advising. Stick with the facts and answer questions grieving children have as directly, simply, and honestly as possible. Answer only what the question is asking. The following guidelines and suggestions may be of assistance to you in working with a grieving student.

What parents and teachers can do:

LISTEN
Allow children to be the teachers about their grief experiences: Give children the opportunity to tell their story and be a good listener. Listen to whatever they want to share. It may be difficult but just listening can be a powerful healing force. Encourage the child to express his/her feelings. Accept each feeling and reaction as being valid.

GUIDE
Encourage children to ask questions about loss and death. Let the student lead the discussion. Answer as honestly and as simply as possible, but don’t be anxious about not knowing all the answers. Treat questions with respect and a willingness to help the child find his or her own answers. If something is unclear, let the student know.

Encourage children to ask as many questions as they want about death or the traumatic loss. Often if things are not discussed, children will create their own, inaccurate interpretations of events. Helping children understand the event will insure that their interpretations are accurate, as painful as the truth may be.

No matter how well intended, teachers should not impose their own religious beliefs on students when answering questions. If a child expresses religious ideas about death, it is important to respect them.

BE HONEST
Use a normal voice and use the words “dead”, “dying”, “death”, etc.

Don’t lie or tell half-truths to children about the tragic event: Children are often bright and sensitive. They will see through false information and wonder why you do not trust them with the truth. Lies do not help the child through the healing process or help develop effective coping strategies for life’s future tragedies or losses. Honest discussion will allow the student to open up and have a fuller understanding of the events.

BE UNDERSTANDING
Don’t assume that every child in a certain age group understands death in the same way or with the same feelings: All children are different and their view of the world is unique and shaped by different experiences. There is no right or wrong way to do grieve. There may be a great deal of anger, the need for vengeance, and an ongoing sense of worry for your student. Always remember that it is hard work for your student to grieve. You are only able to be helpful in supporting them in their process.

Be patient. Children process information at a different rate than adults. Children may bring up the subject again and again as they try to accept and learn to live with what has happened.

Encourage them to work with you to make modifications and accommodations to their schoolwork. This will help them voice what they need and how they are feeling. Grieving is a process. Make sure you are patient and give
them adequate time to resume a normal workflow. Putting too much pressure on them too quickly may result in an emotional breakdown or school avoidance.

**COMFORT AND ENCOURAGE**
Offer appropriate warmth, affection and the assurance of your physical presence.

Encourage “active coping” techniques, which refers to taking action to seek out help when one is hurting. Be straightforward with your student that you really want to understand what they need and how they are feeling. Give them time and encouragement since they often may not be able to express themselves or let you know what they need right away.

Protect emotional students from ridicule or bullying. Connect with students who are having difficulty coping with the loss by asking how they are doing; checking in with them on a regular basis; letting them know you are available to listen; or giving them positive feedback about their attendance or classroom work.

**KNOW YOUR OWN LIMITS**
Be aware of your own need to grieve. The death of a student, teacher, or staff member can affect you as well as your students. You should support your students as well as you can, but not at the expense of your emotional needs. If you need to miss school or take time to get help yourself, you will be much more effective at helping your students in the long run. Remember that they are learning from your response. It is perfectly appropriate to express your sadness, but if you become hysterical it may be more upsetting for them.

Know your own limitations and comfort level! Don’t be afraid to tell the child that you have listened long enough for one day. Telling the child that you will be available to listen in the future will not leave the child with feelings of abandonment.

Don’t try to do too much by yourself. Feel free to seek advice from others, such as a school counselor on how to deal with death related issues or connect the child with another staff member who knows him/her, or to an agency or organization that might be helpful in assisting in the grief process.

Remember to model adult behavior for your students that shows them how responsible adults react to loss and respond to a crisis. Adults may grieve, but they continue to act with consideration and maintain calm routines at school.

**ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO SEEK ADDITIONAL HELP**
Connect them with a place to go outside the classroom if they become upset. This may be the school psychologist or counselor’s office, the librarian, whoever seems like they will be most helpful. Let the student know they are free to leave the class whenever they feel like they need space.

Crisis counselors can teach students about the normal signs and symptoms of grief and/or trauma so that students can assess and understand their own behavior and learn new ways of coping.

**Sources:**
“Guidelines for Responding to the Death of a Student or School Staff.” National Center for School Crisis & Bereavement.


“How to Help Your Students Deal with Grief and Loss.” Teaching Community

“Suggestions for Teachers When a Child has had a Loved One Die.” American Hospice.