



Handling Grief & Loss Issues & Crises In the Church & Children's Ministry Settings

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In order to be effectively prepared to handle grief and loss issues and crises in the church, it is wise to establish a "Crisis Team" which includes an appointed Crisis Team Leader. The Team Leader could be the Children's Pastor or other person of authority in the church who is also someone who could easily be connected to information pertaining to the situation and the family or families involved. This will also be the designated person that the family contacts when they have updates – thus eliminating the need for the family to make or receive multiple calls from the church. The Crisis Team will be composed of adults in your children's ministry who feel comfortable stepping up to the plate in the midst of crisis and grief. These will be the folks who will disseminate information, field questions, and ultimately become the "go to" people. This team could organize and get the family's permission (when the time is appropriate) such things as: communication, meal deliveries, child care, transportation, house cleaning, etc. Also, a "Crisis Team Phone Tree" should be organized for efficient communication to Team members.

Keep in mind that sometimes those closest to the situation may not be the most effective Crisis Team members because of their own emotional involvement and grief.

When the Crisis Affects the Children in Your Ministry

The following suggestions can be adapted and used both prior to and after the death has occurred with regard to communication to the children at church.

[If it is known ahead of time that a death is imminent, the children can be talked to **prior to** the actual death occurring, with plans for continued updates as appropriate.]

- ♥ **FACTS** - as soon as possible, a clear explanation of what is/has occurred should be given to the children. This should be done as honestly as possible, using real words – NO EUPHEMISMS.

A statement should be prepared by the Crisis Team Leader which clearly explains the facts. This statement should first be relayed to the children's parents via phone calls or in a written memo that is either mailed, e-mailed or given to the parents at church. This statement can then be read to the children by Crisis Team Members, Pastoral Staff, Sunday School teachers or other designated adults, so that consistency is assured. (This also takes into consideration the emotional state of the adults involved; it is much easier to read a prepared statement than speak 'off the cuff'.)

- ♥ **QUESTIONS** - a time for the asking/answering of questions must be set aside ASAP, preferably with a Crisis Team member present.
- ♥ **CONTINUED UPDATES** - as soon as new information is learned, that needs to be passed along to the children as well (i.e., new facts, funeral information, the church's response, etc.)

- ♥ **PARTICIPATION** – the children should be given the opportunity to participate where appropriate
 1. attending funeral/memorial services (obviously this is up to each child's parents)
 2. helping to plan a way for the church to honor the child who has died as well as the child's family (paying special attention to any surviving siblings)
- ♥ **SHARING** - follow-up with the children who wish to talk about their feelings, etc. (can be formal or informal; timing is no issue)

A similar outline should be followed for any adults directly involved in this crisis, such as the Sunday School teachers who will be working directly with those children most impacted by the crisis:

- **FACTS**
- **QUESTIONS**
- **CONTINUED UPDATES**
- **PARTICIPATION**
- **SHARING/DEBRIEFING**

Perhaps an expanded phone tree is established in order to keep these individuals informed.

Important Considerations with Regard to the Children

- ♥ Do not isolate or insulate children from the death or from others' as well as their own grief.
- ♥ Listen (with your ears, eyes and heart).
- ♥ Answer the children's questions as directly and as honestly as you can even if the answer is, "I don't know." (We can follow-up a child's tough question with, "*That's a great question!*"). This expresses your respect toward the child and the very real feelings he or she is experiencing. Keep in mind that children tend to know when they aren't being told the whole truth; sometimes the answers they will come up with in their own minds are much more frightening than the truth.
- ♥ Encourage and define appropriate expressions of grief (talking, drawing, writing, yelling, running, etc.). Provide appropriate and "safe" places for grief expression.
- ♥ This death may trigger thoughts and feelings about other losses the children have experienced in their own families. It is essential to take time to listen to their stories and experiences.
- ♥ **AVOID EUPHEMISMS AND CLICHÉS!!!**
 - Someone has **died**, not "passed away" or "gone to sleep." These euphemisms, or words used in place of the word dead, can confuse children. Instead, one should use simple, direct language in all explanations pertaining to the death or pending death.
 - God did not **TAKE** the child, **NEED** the child or **CAUSE** the illness. Making statements such as these, first of all, is very presumptuous, second, leaves a very scary portrait of our loving God, and third, is theologically improbable and likely unbiblical. Check with your pastor about his views here.
 - When someone dies, there is nothing in scripture which suggests that they "become an angel". Angels are not former humans! Angels are created beings distinct from human kind and are messengers and helpers of God.

♥ Example: The children may wonder, because their friend died, “Why didn’t God answer our prayers?” A perfectly acceptable answer is, “We don’t know.” Another avenue to take with regard to this important question is to suggest that perhaps God **has** answered everyone’s prayers. In His sovereignty, He has given this child the ultimate healing, because He knew that would be best. When going with this explanation, it is crucial to follow-up with the validation of everyone’s very real grief feelings. “While (child’s name) is now healed and perfect in heaven, we are all still very sad because we will miss him and we wish he were still with us.”

♥ Example: “Why did God allow our friend to get cancer?” What a great question for all of us. While only God knows this answer, we do know that the reason evil exists is because of human sin. If there were no sin in the world, there would not be death, illness, sadness or pain. We also know that God can take any tragedy, no matter how devastating and use it for good for His kingdom! (*Romans 8:28*).

**Another critical point is that in *Psalms 139* God declares through David that each individual conceived is “wondrously” made. This does not mean ‘wonderful,’ as in ‘perfect,’ but rather that each individual has a unique and God-given purpose. We may not yet understand this child’s God-given purpose, but we can be sure that his purpose has been or will be fulfilled perfectly – according to God’s own will and pleasure.

♥ Example: Some children may be fearful that they too will “get” or “catch” cancer. It is important to explain to these children that cancer isn’t something that one can catch from the germs of someone else, like we can a cold. They also need to know that there are many people who have cancer and do not die – they get well again. There is much that doctors do not yet know about cancer, but every day they are learning more so that they can help more and more people get better.

♥ Some children will have very real worries about someone in their immediate family dying, “Will my (brother, sister, mommy, daddy) die too?” We need to be available to listen to these worries and offer comfort and reassurance, while at the same time being realistic and not suggest that no one in their family is ever going to die.