Children have the capacity to cope with stronger feelings of loss than many of us realize. If they sense that parents or other adults are hiding something, their suspicions can lead to fears and fantasies that may be more problematic for them than the truth. A parent's expression of sorrow conveys to children that strong emotions are natural and that mourning does not have to be hidden. When children are allowed to grieve with others, they can have the comfort and reassurance they need. When people are able to share their reactions, experiences, and feelings when confronted with tragedy, they feel less helpless and alone.

The following general principles can be helpful when discussing death with children:

* It is important to acknowledge the reality of the critical incident and your willingness to talk about it.

* Be simple and straightforward. Discuss death or other tragedy in terms the students can easily understand.

* Give the facts regarding the incident in a concrete, clear, and accurate manner.

* Express your own feelings in an honest, open, calm way that encourages children to express their grief and fear. Some children choose not to talk; the discussion of the event strikes them as a source of more pain or fear, and some have a hard time verbalizing their feelings. These children should not be pressured to talk.

* Project confidence and calmness. Be encouraging and reassuring.

* Listen, acknowledge the loss or fear, and have a nonjudgmental attitude. Listening is profoundly healing. You don't have to make it better. You don't have to take away the pain. It's their pain. One has to experience it in their own time and way.

* Be patient. Many times because of their need for reassurance, children will repeat the same questions. Some children may tell about their relationship and reconstruct the loss. Repetitions of this sort are part of the normal grieving process. Give children the opportunity to tell their story and be a good listener.

* Be prepared for children who may feel the need to discuss unpleasant features of the relationship. Anger directed towards the deceased person is one of the many normal responses to loss.

* Children who may have had recent conflict with the deceased may be particularly affected.

ATSS: Association of Traumatic Stress Specialists and Authors (2002)