

Conversation Starters for School Personnel Working with Students Impacted by Parent Death

The death of a parent can be one of the most difficult challenges of a child's life. Children vary by age in how well they understand and accept death, and how families talk about death can vary greatly from culture to culture. Although difficult, discussing recent parental loss with a student is very important. These discussions can help provide a safe space for students to ask questions and feel reassured about their own safety.

Religious beliefs can be a source of strength and support for individuals during many difficult periods; however, for some children, especially those who have not been exposed to religion, it can be confusing or worrying to hear religious references. It may be helpful to discuss with a family member or cultural leader about their beliefs about death and the afterlife before talking to the child.

When initiating these conversations, it is often useful to start with a question or prompt like the ones below. As much as possible, allow the child to guide the conversation themselves by asking open-ended questions. The conversation starters below are grouped to help facilitate age-appropriate conversations.

Preschoolers and Younger Children

- Tell me about what's happening in your home.
- What has your mommy/daddy told you about your daddy/mommy?
- What have you noticed your mommy/daddy doing differently lately? What do you think they're feeling that makes them do those things? What made them feel this way?
- When someone important to you dies, some kids have questions about death. What questions do you have about death?
- What are some ways that your family shares feelings?
- How do you think you can make your mommy/daddy feel better during this tough time?
- How does it make you feel that mommy/daddy is acting a bit different?

Elementary and Middle School Students*

- What's your understanding of what happened to your mom/dad?
- What changes have you noticed at home since your mom/dad passed?
- How do you talk about what happened with your family?
- Remembering someone you loved after they're gone can be very painful. How do you and your family talk about your mom/dad?

- When someone important to you dies, some kids have questions about death. What questions do you have?
- Tell me about how you're feeling. Is it physical, emotional, or both?
- Talking about your feelings can sometimes be difficult. What do you think are some healthy ways that you can express what you are feeling?
- How do you talk about your feelings with your family?
- What are some extra tasks or roles that you have taken on to help your family function recently?
- How do you think the members of your family feel about what happened?

High School Students**

- How have you been handling your mom's/dad's passing?
- What has been the most difficult thing for you since your parent passed?
- What changes have you noticed in how your behaviors since your mom/dad passed? What about in your thoughts? In your feelings?
- What changes have you noticed in your daily life, routines, activities, or relationships since your mom/dad died?
- Sometimes it's really hard to talk about a loved one who has died, and sometimes talking about that person is all you want to do. Do you have anyone that you feel comfortable talking to about your mom/dad?
- Who are the people that have helped support you the most during this difficult time?
- Who do you talk to when you're feeling overwhelmed?
- What do you normally do when you feel overwhelmed? What did you used to do when you felt stressed?

*Questions for preschoolers and younger children may also be appropriate.

**Questions for preschoolers and younger children as well as elementary and middle school students may also be appropriate.