

Sample Parental Information Letter

Sending written communication home with students or having this information posted on your school's Web site is an important piece of the school's postvention strategy. If you remember that communication with parents should convey the control, support, and structure that are guiding the school's response to the student body, your messaging should be effective. Here are a few additional guidelines to help you structure the content of these communications:

- Remember the “need to know.” Your role is not to provide all available details about what has happened. Most likely, this information is already circulating through most of the community. Parents want you to tell them how the school is addressing the needs of their children in the aftermath of this tragic death.
- Acknowledge the shock and sadness that are undoubtedly present throughout the larger school community. Include an expression of condolence and sympathy to the family of the deceased as well as to the other community members who may be personally affected by the loss.
- Remind parents that you have a protocol in place to assist the school community in managing reactions to events like this. Knowing that the school proactively structured a response strategy sends the message to parents that while the death may have been uncontrollable, the school is in control of the way its aftermath will be managed for their children.
- Outline the resources in the school and through the school's community partners that are available to provide support to the students and their families.
- Give parents a measure of control by alerting them to reactions their children may experience as a result of the death. In addition, provide suggestions for talking to their children about what happened. The chapter 6 handout *When a Friend of Your Child's Dies by Suicide: A Guide for Parents* can be easily adapted to conversations about traumatic deaths that occur under other circumstances. The chapter 4 handout *Almost Everything You Wanted to Know about Grief: A Guide for Educators* also contains helpful information for parents.
- If the death has been ruled a suicide, alert parents to concerns about imitation and encourage them to be observant for changes in their child that might be related to the death. Urge them to contact resource staff to discuss their concerns.
- Remind parents that misinformation and rumors will probably be circulating for days, about the death as well as about the school's response or lack thereof. Caution them to check out what they hear from reliable sources. Invite them to call the school personally if they have any questions or concerns about the way the school is responding to the needs of their children.

With these guidelines in mind, let's look at a sample letter that demonstrates how to convey this information succinctly and accurately.

Sample Letter

Dear Parents,

Our school learned this morning that (*name*), one of our seventh-grade students, died tragically over the weekend. While the details about what happened are still unclear, I do know that many of us in the school community have been greatly affected by this death. I know you join me in sending kind thoughts and condolences to (*name's*) family as well as to the other members of our school family who will be affected by (*name's*) death.

Our school has had a crisis plan in place for quite some time to prepare us for meeting the needs of the school community at difficult times like this. Our staff have been trained in the most developmentally appropriate ways to be supportive to your children, and we will structure both group and individualized opportunities to provide your children with the help they need.

In addition to the resources here at the school, a variety of community resources are available for you and your children, especially over the next several days. Tonight several drop-in centers will be open from 6:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. at local churches. St. Peter's Episcopal Church, United Methodist Church, and Star of Bethlehem Catholic Church have graciously donated space in their halls so trained resource staff can meet with any community members who would like their support. If you would like to talk to a mental health professional in a more private setting, I have attached a list of local practitioners with whom you can set up an appointment.

While we certainly intend to provide support to your children during the school day, we know you will want to do the same at home. We will post several documents on our school Web site to help you in this process. If you would like to talk with us about particular concerns you have about your child, please do not hesitate to contact our resource staff at the school's main phone number.

The next few days will be challenging. You may be confused by the rumors and gossip that will invariably surface to fill in the gaps of information about what occurred. You might even hear stories about what is or is not being done at the school. While we can assure you that we are prepared to address your children's needs, we are open to talking with you about any of your concerns.

As a competent and compassionate school community, I know that we are joined in sadness about this loss. I am hopeful we can also join together in healing.