

Guidance for Teachers and other School Personnel around the time of the One-Year Anniversary of the Shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School

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As we approach the one-year anniversary of the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, teachers and other school personnel may wonder how best to acknowledge the passing of a year, what to expect of their students, and how they can be of assistance. This guidance will help you and your schools think about how to prepare for the one-year anniversary and provide advice on how classroom teachers can handle this topic sensitively. When using this guidance, it is important to keep the following things in mind:

- Children and adults, even if they were not directly impacted, may still have feelings related to the event.
- The anniversary may remind people of the feelings they had around the time of the initial event.
- Children and adults may become distressed about other troubling events in their lives when they are reminded about the tragedy – even if their own experiences are unrelated.
- There is no one “best way” to acknowledge the anniversary. But saying nothing in response to children’s questions says a lot.
- Helping children deal with a difficult event is hard work – teachers and school staff need to be sure to take care of themselves.

What should we expect to see in our students around the time of the anniversary?

At the time of an anniversary, just as with adults, children frequently experience a recurrence of some of the feelings associated with a loss or tragedy. Given the enormity of the tragedy of December 14, 2012, the likely media attention, and the recent release of audio of the 9-1-1 calls and official reports about the shooting, it is likely that many adults and children will be thinking about the event around the time of the anniversary, even if they do not live in Newtown and did not experience personal losses from that event.

Children who appear to be “back to normal” may still be feeling at times sad, scared, anxious, or angry. They may have difficulties that neither they nor adults around them connect to the school shooting. Especially at the time of this first anniversary, these difficult feelings and reactions may become more pronounced.

There are many ways that children, and adults, may indicate that they are feeling stressed or distressed, such as: depressed or irritable mood, sleep disturbances, change in academic performance, change in appetite, or behavioral problems. The extent and nature of difficulties may be related to many factors, including the child’s age, the child’s personal history (e.g., of prior trauma, loss, or threats to self or family members), and the support the child received from peers, parents, and school staff.

What other reactions should I anticipate?

A crisis often uncovers feelings related to other current or past troubling events that were not fully resolved, many of which will not be directly related to the crisis at hand. Around the time of the anniversary, children may become focused on some other crisis in their life – such as the death by natural cause of a family member, or ongoing or past abuse. We need to remember that traumatic exposure, including ongoing or chronic trauma, was a part of life for many children prior, and subsequent, to December 14, 2012. Understandably, for these children their own personal crisis may take precedent. If we demonstrate to children that we are available to help them deal with troubling events such as a school shooting, they may be more comfortable telling us about other worrisome thoughts or feelings – and provide us an opportunity to help them cope and adjust.

Teaching children in school about important and relevant events is the best way to demonstrate that education, and schools, are important and relevant.

Children and their parents depend on schools to help children understand and deal with important events in their lives and communities. If we avoid dealing with important issues in schools or imply to children that we do not think they are capable of discussing difficult topics or that it is inappropriate to talk about these events and their associated feelings, we risk children seeing schools as irrelevant to their personal lives and unable to deal with difficult issues. We risk teaching them that these events and the many lives impacted by these events are unimportant or inappropriate to discuss. We risk implying that there is something wrong with them if they still have some troubling feelings about the event even a year later.

Adults should avoid telling children what they should feel or how they should express their feelings – instead, adults must try to listen to children and follow their lead. Imposing a moment of silence on children as a way to mark the passing of another year may not be appreciated by children if they feel that they have not been given the opportunity to talk about the event throughout the year. But if children are given the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings, they may choose to acknowledge the needs of others through a moment of silence.

In addition to remembering the losses associated with the events of December 14th, it is also important to remind children and their parents of all of the steps we are taking to keep them safe, to highlight community strengths, and to foster a sense of hope for the future. For example, some schools may choose to acknowledge the anniversary by conducting classroom or school-wide activities that help children think about how their own community service can help them contribute to and enhance their local communities.

What should I do if I find this work difficult?

Teachers and other staff who are dealing with their own personal losses, even if they are not related directly to the events of December 14, 2012, may find it difficult to approach this topic with students. But even for those teachers who are not dealing with personal losses, helping children understand and cope with a tragedy, even a year later, is hard work. It is difficult enough for us, as adults, to understand and deal with our own feelings; to have to, at the same time, try to figure out what children – especially a large and diverse group of children – are thinking and feeling and how to help them can seem overwhelming. Children’s questions and reactions are often very poignant – they ask questions that we often can’t answer and frankly may not even wish to think about. But being able to help children cope with meaningful and troubling events can be extremely gratifying – it can define what separates a good instructor from an educator that has personally touched a child’s life and made a meaningful difference.

If adults are going to be of assistance to children, then it is important that we figure out how to have our needs met. It is important for all adults working with children to give some personal thought to how they have been affected by these experiences and what impact this may have on their ability to facilitate such discussions with students. You may find it useful to identify colleagues that you can talk with about any concerns or apprehensions you may have. Providing an opportunity for faculty and staff to talk about their own reactions prior to talking with students may be useful to them personally and will better prepare them to respond to the children’s needs.

What other advice should we give parents?

Too much attention to the anniversary can also cause problems. This should be considered both in school and at home. Parents should be advised to limit the amount of television coverage, especially of graphic material that may be broadcast on the anniversary, particularly for younger children. If older children and adolescents do view television, radio, internet or other media coverage, parents should try to watch along with them and use it as an opportunity to discuss not only what they are seeing, but how it makes them feel. Recording the broadcast allows parents and children to pause for discussion or if they are feeling overwhelmed. Parents and teachers should work together to ensure that children aren’t overwhelmed by the material related to the anniversary.

Where can I find additional information?

This guidance represents some initial points to consider in planning for the one-year anniversary.

Further guidance and information are posted on the CSDE website at:
<http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2683&Q=334634>.

Additional material can be found at the website of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement at www.schoolcrisiscenter.org, including a free booklet for parents and other adults that can be downloaded in English or Spanish on how to support grieving children (www.achildgrief.com).