

Government of Israel
Department of Education
Pedagogical Office
Senior Branch of Psychology Consulting Services
Division for Crisis and Emergency Response and Suicide Prevention

BRIEFING: Delivering Difficult News to School-Aged Children in a Virtual Meeting Environment

Preface

This briefing discusses delivering difficult news to students when they cannot be gathered in person at the school and will be meeting virtually. In this case, it is recommended that parents will be the first people to deliver the difficult news to their children. Parents will receive directions (written and through a virtual meeting)¹ on how to deliver difficult news in this context. Following students' conversations with their parents, school staff will conduct a group virtual meeting with the students. It is important to choose a virtual platform that will make participants comfortable.²

Goals for the Initial Meeting with Students

- ✓ Strengthening feelings of class "togetherness" – focusing on individual and group relationships³
- ✓ Setting up the meeting in a structured way and focusing on facts – preventing the spread of rumors and misinformation
- ✓ Providing opportunities for sharing and "venting"
- ✓ Noticing students' feelings and learning needs
- ✓ Providing the basis for follow-up meetings in small groups

This briefing relates to the following situations:

- Death or illness / difficult injury of a student at the educational institution.
- Death of a staff member from COVID-19 or unrelated factors.
- Death of a student's parent or immediate family member (from COVID-19 or unrelated factors).

Note: The overall response to these types of events will be decided by the emergency preparedness team on a case-by-case basis. The team will plan their response based on their knowledge of the event's effects on different members of the school community.

The initial group meeting will be led and moderated by the class's teachers and social worker or other significant adult who is close with the students, in coordination with local educational psychology services. It is important to remember that students, like all of us, are going through a complex period of uncertainty, anxiety, and social distancing, and so it is important to conduct this meeting with the utmost sensitivity.

Gathering the students for a virtual meeting will occur after the emergency preparedness team will first meet virtually with the school staff to inform and direct the staff in their conversations with students from other classes, as necessary (see the brief on the teachers' initial conversation – link).

¹ Please see Addendum 1, which appears at the end of this document and provides a number of suggestions for parents on this topic.

² Please see Addendum 2, which appears at the end of this document and discusses a number of relevant features of virtual communication that are important to note.

³ Please see Addendum 3, which appears at the end of this document and discusses messaging that builds resilience and that could offer an anchor and provide a feeling of security during these different conversations.

Government of Israel
Department of Education
Pedagogical Office
Senior Branch of Psychology Consulting Services
Division for Crisis and Emergency Response and Suicide Prevention

Group Meeting with the Students

Possible opening:

“Dear students, we are experiencing a difficult and unprecedented period, in which we cannot meet and we are required to limit the number of participants at each in-person event. Even while experiencing this difficult event, we cannot hug each other and be together as we would like. Nonetheless, we want to experience togetherness, and for that reason we have gathered in this virtual meeting to allow us to process the difficult event that occurred”

A. Giving factual and trustworthy information about the event

- “Unfortunately, I have to share the difficult news that some of you have already heard. On _____ day, something sad and painful happened. _____ passed away. Who has heard about it?”

This opening allows for gradual exposure to the event, the giving of appropriate details, and a focus on accuracy.

- The moderator must provide only the factual information that was provided by an official and certified source and corroborated by professionals. It is appropriate to say, “This is the information I know as of now; anything else is a rumor.” It is important to discern between facts and rumors and remind students that updated information will be provided as soon as it is received.
- Do not hide information from students. Students will receive the information in some way, so it is preferable that they receive it from an educational and significant figure who will relay information in a responsible and controlled fashion.

B. Giving students the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings

“What thoughts were going through your head when you heard?”

“What do you think and feel right now?”

It is important to note that it is natural to have a variety of feelings after such an event, and that these feelings change and lessen over time.

C. Referral to virtual processing meetings in small groups

“We will continue the conversation in small groups of five students, and I, the social worker, or another known teacher will meet with you virtually in a small group in which we will brainstorm together how we can support and help each other and those who were hurt.”

A Proposal for Continuing the Conversation in a Small Group

1. **Emotional connection and setting the goal of the conversation:** One could open with the following, for example, “I am sorry that we are meeting under such sad circumstances. In today’s meeting we will share with each other and empower each other.”
2. **Invitation to share thoughts and feelings:** “Who wants to share their thoughts and feelings after receiving the sad news in class?”

**Government of Israel
Department of Education
Pedagogical Office
Senior Branch of Psychology Consulting Services
Division for Crisis and Emergency Response and Suicide Prevention**

3. **Connection to personal empowerment and effective coping following the event – brainstorming:**
 - “How could you help the friend that experienced the difficult event?”
 - “What could help us cope now?” Because we cannot meet or attend the funeral and the *shiva* as usual, let’s think of other ways to be together, comfort, and empower each other.
4. **The meeting will end with a task that the group will take on, such as:**
 - Making a video for their friend
 - Daily communication rotation
 - Sending an empowering communication every day, planned ahead of time
 - Paying condolence visits in small groups, in coordination with the family and in accordance with Department of Health recommendations
5. **At the conclusion of the meeting, tell the students,** “In a few days, we will meet again to talk about this event and update each other on the tasks we assigned to the group, and at the end of the week, we will conduct another meeting for the entire class, to give everyone another opportunity to share and hear each other’s thoughts.”

Note: At the end of the meeting, the team members who moderated these meetings will in turn meet with each other and present the vulnerabilities they noticed, and the individual, group, and class aid initiatives they created.

Addendum 1: A Number of Guiding Directions for Parents on How to Discuss an Adverse Event with Your Child

As we find ourselves in this difficult situation and cannot meet as a group, we ask for each parent to tell their child what happened and discuss with them. Here are a number of important directions regarding this conversation:

1. **Speak with your children openly, candidly, and calmly**, using language in keeping with their stage of development. You could say, “I unfortunately heard that ____ died yesterday. This is so sad for us and especially for _____ from your class. Have you heard about it?”
2. **You can express your feelings**, but make sure to do it in a controlled way. Exposure to emotional upheaval could rattle your child’s confidence and create a sense of anxiety.

Government of Israel
Department of Education
Pedagogical Office
Senior Branch of Psychology Consulting Services
Division for Crisis and Emergency Response and Suicide Prevention

3. **Avoid speaking in ways that your child cannot process:** When it comes to difficult topics, we sometimes have the tendency to protect children, especially young children, from information, and to talk among ourselves and assume that the children do not understand our conversations. It is important to remember that partial understanding and exposure to a worried tone of conversation can harm children. Taking in non-verbal messaging and partial information could lead a child to “complete the picture” using their imagination – and this imaginative picture can be much scarier than the reality. For this reason, it is important to discuss the event in a matter of fact and clear way, staying open to all of the child’s questions.
4. **Encourage the child to perform a meaningful action in relation to the event:** Suggest that the child write, draw, speak on the phone with the student who was hurt (in ways appropriate with the child’s development and in accordance with their relationship with the other child). This activity, especially an activity that feels connected to the event, can help a child’s functioning and prevent post-traumatic stress symptoms.
5. **Giving extra attention to a child who is having a more difficult time:** A child who is introverted, does not take part in activities, complains of lack of appetite, and talks about fears that prevent them from sleeping – please allow this child to share with you and do not invalidate their feelings. Ask them what would help them relax, teach them deep breathing, offer distractions, and create empowering sentences together and hang them in prominent places in the home.
6. **When you need additional counseling and assistance,** you can turn to those providing aid as part of the school, and to the educational psychology service.
7. **It is also important to use your intuition as a parent** and trust your ability to interact with your child.

Addendum 2: A Number of Relevant Characteristics of Virtual Communication to Take into Consideration

Generally, the principles of communicating directly about a crisis event hold true for virtual communication. You can conduct the conversation using whatever platform is comfortable for participants (Zoom, phone call, etc.). With that, virtual communication poses unique challenges, such as:

- **Difficulties in reading body language:** We see the person in front of us, but only partially.
- **The lack of direct eye contact:** For example, in a virtual meeting, a side glance could be seen as showing a lack of interest or ignoring the speaker.
- **Exhaustion:** Some people find that watching a screen is exhausting when compared to face-to-face communication.
- **Privacy concerns:** It is important to be aware of these concerns and note that the meeting is in an open and “exposed” space. The setting is uncontrolled, and it is sometimes difficult to create the best setting for open communication (due to background noise, one family computer, pressures from family, etc.)

Due to these factors, it is important to be aware of the characteristics of virtual communication and plan for solutions to possible interruptions. Check the setting of the student’s and adult’s devices. Ahead of time, discuss the benefits and disadvantages of this type of communication. (For example, note, “When I am looking down, it is because I am writing down notes, not because I am not listening.”) Ensure that

Government of Israel
Department of Education
Pedagogical Office
Senior Branch of Psychology Consulting Services
Division for Crisis and Emergency Response and Suicide Prevention

the conversation is no longer than 30 minutes, unless there is a specific need and the group agrees to speak for longer. A large number of short conversations is better than a small number of long conversations.

Addendum 3: Messaging That Builds Resilience and Provides an Anchor in Conversation

1. People respond in different ways, and it is important for us to remember that the way we respond affects those around us. Remember the repercussions of what you say to others.
2. Coping together gives us strength. Feelings of togetherness strengthen and give hope. After a crisis or stressful situation, it is helpful to say, “We are experiencing a difficult time, but together we will find the power within us to cope and thrive.”
3. We all have different coping mechanisms, and it is important that we notice them within us and strengthen our abilities to choose the most appropriate coping mechanism (the “Basic Ph” model by Mooli Lahad and Ofra Ayalon).
4. Every effective coping activity connected to the event can strengthen our resilience.
5. Humor, happiness, and optimism are positive and joyful tools that help us cope in crisis and stress situations.
6. Listening to a friend in crisis and checking in on them is helpful for long-term healing.
7. Asking for help is a testament to the asker’s mental strength – it is not a weakness.
8. There are many avenues for help, and it is important to reach out to them – to parents, friends, school staff, and other professional and therapeutic resources.

Think about the most important message you want to give your child.