

# PROJECT CHAI

CRISIS, TRAUMA, SUPPORT

## A Project of Chai Lifeline

### HOW TO HELP STUDENTS COPE WITH TRAGEDY

SUGGESTIONS FROM THE PROFESSIONALS OF PROJECT CHAI

- ❖ Know the details before you speak to your students. Children today have an uncanny ability to ferret out facts (or what they believe are facts) and feel entitled to know more than most of us would have at their ages.
- ❖ Make sure information released to children is consistent from class to class. Quell any rumors with the facts.
- ❖ Focus on the death, not on the cause. Reassure students that childhood death is a very rare and unusual event.
- ❖ Validate the students' emotional reactions. Expect that responses will range from children who are very emotional to those who may be less demonstrative. Those closest to the *niftar/nifteres* or children who have experienced the death of someone close to them will most likely feel the impact more profoundly, but both ends of the spectrum, and everything in between, are normal.
- ❖ It is possible that children whose families may have been the victims of accidents or other emotional stresses, i.e., illness or loss, will be very agitated or distressed. Students who express dread or undue fear or who seem to be very upset by the tragedy may benefit from speaking with a mental health professional or other suitable member of your staff. Depending on the situation it may not be appropriate or possible to directly approach the student; use your judgment. The professionals of Project CHAI are a resource for any questions.
- ❖ Children often feel something very strongly, then seem to let go, and come back to it later. Explain to students that this is normal. It does not mean they liked the person less if their grief seems to abate or wax and wane.
- ❖ After notifying and discussing the death, it is usually comforting for children to engage in an activity like prayer or learning, giving *tzedaka*, or engaging in a mitzvah in the merit of the *niftar/nifteres*.
- ❖ When siblings return to school, classmates should treat him/her as they normally would. Don't call attention to a child who is saying kaddish.

#### POSSIBLE RESPONSES BY AGE

- ❖ Very young children do not understand the concept of "rare." They are more trusting and will respond to your reassurances if you speak in a calm, loving manner.
- ❖ Elementary age children may be very interested in the facts, and therefore may listen to distortions and rumors. Asking questions is a common coping strategy at this age. Listen and answer in an age-appropriate manner.

- ❖ Younger children may appear impassive or unresponsive immediately upon hearing about tragedy, but have profound responses later on. This is not atypical. Don't discount it, but don't be too alarmed.
- ❖ Adolescents are more likely to grapple with *hashkafic* questions. They can openly wonder "Why bad things happen to good people." They may even aggressively question a rabbi. Lengthy debates and refutations may exacerbate these challenges. Be prepared for the discussion; you can talk about the incomprehensible nature of tragedies. Be honest. If you can't answer a question, "I don't know" is perfectly acceptable.

#### THOUGHTS FOR TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

- ❖ Notify parents in each class of the discussions and projects initiated. Knowing how the school approached this matter allows parents to reinforce the messages consistently. It may be advisable to inform parents that the school has consulted with professionals, umbrella organizations, *rabbanim* and your own staff as applicable.
- ❖ If you feel personally distressed or derailed by the tragedy, address it first before talking about it with your students. If you feel that you can't control your emotions, have another teacher, rabbi, or professional lead the discussion. Remember that it is not a reflection on your skills as a teacher. While it is appropriate for students to know you have been affected and are sad about the event, overt crying or distress may be harmful and even inspire distress in your students. Teachers of young students may need to explain why they became emotional.

#### PROJECTS

- ❖ Students can put together a scrapbook of stories, memories, pictures, and remembrances to present to the family.
- ❖ Many classes and schools dedicate learning, *mitzvah*, or *tzedaka* projects to the memory of the *niftar/nifteres*.

WE INVITE YOU TO CONTACT US IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS  
OR NEED FURTHER SUGGESTIONS OR GUIDANCE.

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