

Working with Families Do's and Don'ts

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- DO say you are sorry. If you express your emotions, it helps to validate the parents' grief and respect the child's memory.
- DO stay with the parents or caregivers as long as you are able. Do not leave parents alone; make sure someone will stay with them.
- DO remember to speak slowly. You may have to repeat yourself.
- DO be aware that people grieve differently. The stoic individual may harbor as much pain as the one who is sobbing.
- DO seek support for yourself in coping with the tragedy of a child's death. Speak with fellow professionals, attend crisis debriefings, and contact bereavement counselors to help you cope in your personal and professional lives.
- DON'T try to find a silver lining. Other children in the family (or the possibility of future children) do not erase the loss of this child. Don't impose your religious views.
- DON'T be afraid to use the child's name.
- DON'T withhold information. Help the parents be as well informed as possible, sharing sources of support. Don't give information that you are uncertain about.

Basic principles for working with grieving families

Care: Empathize with the parents. Tell them you are sorry. Tell them your emotions. Do not say, "I know how you feel." Allow the parent to express their feelings. Do not try to rationalize the child's death or compare this to other tragedies.

Humanize: Treat the family the way you would want to be treated. Be compassionate. Explain what you are doing in a considerate way. Allow the parents' wishes and rituals to be included in the necessary routine. Offer to meet face-to-face, rather than on the phone.

Listen: Allow parents to speak about their child and to tell their story; this is a powerful need at all stages of grief. Acknowledge the parents' emotions (guilt and anger may be very powerful in early grief). Do not try to rationalize the child's death. Realize that people grieve differently. There may be a more masculine and feminine approach to grief.

Do your job: Make sure you are performing in a professional and ethical manner. Explain to the parents, caregivers and family if your job brings them emotional difficulty. Every aspect of the early response to a child's death will be deeply remembered for years to come. A professional, caring attitude will be long appreciated.

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