Responding to Tragedy

USE THIS CHAT when you want to talk about situations such as violence in the school, trauma in the students’ home or neighborhood environments, natural disasters, or significant events in the news.

Before conducting the Community Chat, consult with the other teachers and administrators at your school site to coordinate an approach to addressing the situation. Plan out what you will say to your students about the event in advance, ensuring you share only what is needed and that you provide accurate information.
COMMUNITY CHAT

Responding to Tragedy

PURPOSE

- Understand and express feelings
- Consider the effects on others of behavior and decisions

ABOUT THIS CHAT

Challenging situations can arise unexpectedly during the school year, and Community Chats can help students understand and cope with the social and emotional impacts of these events. Situations might be school-based (such as violence in the school or the death of a student or other member of the school community), violence or trauma in the students’ home or neighborhood environments, natural disasters, or significant events in the news.

This Community Chat helps you facilitate a discussion about such a situation by addressing what happened, the students’ feelings and questions about it, the impact of the situation on themselves and others, and what, if anything, the students might want to do in response. Use and adapt the lesson as appropriate for your class and your particular situation.

1 Briefly Review Community Chat Expectations

Have students follow the procedures you have established for coming to a chat. Briefly review the “Community Chat Rules.”

2 Introduce Today’s Community Chat Topic

Briefly introduce the topic of the chat. Refer to the “Guidance” section on pages 3–4 for more support in discussing tragic events.

MATERIALS

- “Community Chat Rules” chart
- Paper and a pencil for teacher notes

Teacher Note

Devote the majority of time in this chat to Steps 3 and 4. Move through the other steps quickly.
### 3 Discuss the Topic

Facilitate a discussion using open-ended questions like those below.

- **Q** What do you want to know about this situation?
- **Q** What feelings do you have about it?
- **Q** How does this situation affect the people in our community?

**Students might say:**

- “I feel sad and scared. Maybe it could happen at our school.”
- “I agree with [Zoe], because I can imagine how I would feel if one of my friends got shot.”

### 4 Consider Next Steps

Ask and briefly discuss:

- **Q** How can we care for each other during this period of time?
- **Q** What, if anything, do [you/we] want to do to respond to this situation?

**Students might say:**

- “We can try to include everyone in the school community.”
- “Maybe we can keep the doors of the school locked all the time.”
- “We can pay attention and try to help when our friends are sad.”
- “We can write cards and send them to [the kids in that school].”

Jot notes of students’ responses to use in Step 5.

### 5 Summarize and Adjourn

Use your notes to summarize what you heard the students say, including any decisions made in the meeting. Remind the students of any measures your school has in place to keep them safe, and tell them that you will continue to check in with them over the coming days. Adjourn the meeting.

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**Teacher Note**

Throughout this discussion, practice responding neutrally with interest and using wait time to give the students time to process the discussion.

**Teacher Note**

As the students ask for information, provide any facts that are available, but do not provide too much detail or graphic information. Younger students need just the basic facts. Take note of any students you would like to follow up with individually.
GUIDANCE
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Plan how to discuss the event. Work with teachers and administrators to coordinate an approach for dealing with the situation. Plan in advance what you will say to your students about the event, ensuring you share only what is needed and provide accurate information. During the conversation with students, follow their lead, answering their questions as you are able but not providing more information than they want or are developmentally ready for.

Keep discussion of the event simple and general. Young students need only to know the most basic facts about the event. Providing too much detail or graphic information can be disturbing and is unnecessary for helping them process what has happened. Include any positive information you can, such as information about people who acted courageously or helped victims.

Reassure students of school safety measures. Students may feel apprehensive about their safety at school. While you can never guarantee absolute safety, remind students of measures your school has taken to keep them safe.

Stick to routines. During times of tragedy and sadness, routines and rituals can be particularly comforting to students. Strive to stick to daily routines, including beginning the day with Morning Circle. Avoid changing the daily schedule if at all possible.

Respond to rule-breaking behavior with care. The stress and uncertainty challenging events can engender may lead some students to engage in more rule-breaking behavior. For example, students may be less patient with each other, more defiant, or less attentive during independent work times. When such behaviors arise, respond with a calm, respectful, and caring approach.

Look out for students who struggle. Pay close attention to students who seem particularly affected by the event. Let all students know that they can come to you whenever they need to talk. Reach out to any students who appear particularly anxious or withdrawn or whose behavior markedly changes. Work with the school counselor or other professionals as needed.

Keep families informed. Let families know what you are sharing about the event so that they will be prepared to discuss it with their children. As with students, reassure families of measures the school has in place to keep children safe. Provide suggestions for what families can do at home, such as limiting children’s viewing of media coverage of the event.
**Take care of yourself.** Tragedies take their toll on everyone in the community, including teachers and administrators. Strive to get sufficient rest and exercise. Talk through your own fears and anxieties with those you trust.

**Resources**

- American Academy of Pediatrics, aap.org
- American Psychological Association, apa.org
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, nctsn.org
- *When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens About Grieving & Healing* by Marilyn Gootman provides support for talking about violence with older students.