Responding to Tragedy

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

Before conducting the class meeting, 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.
CLASS MEETING

Responding to Tragedy

PURPOSE

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

ABOUT THIS CLASS MEETING

Challenging situations can arise unexpectedly during the school year, and class meetings 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 class meeting 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 Class Meeting Expectations

Have students follow the procedures you have established for coming to a class meeting, directing them to sit next to their assigned partners. Briefly review the “Class Meeting Rules” and “Our Class Norms” charts.

2 Introduce Today’s Class Meeting Topic

Briefly introduce the topic of the class meeting. Refer to “Grade-Level Guidance” on pages 3–5 for specific guidance for your grade level.

Teacher Note

Devote the majority of time in this class meeting to Steps 3 and 4. Move through the other steps quickly.

MATERIALS

• “Class Meeting Rules” chart
• “Our Class Norms” chart
• Paper and a pencil for teacher notes
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 want to know how he got the gun.”
“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.”

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.

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.
Responding to Tragedy in a Caring School Community

The relationships, skills, and routines built through the Caring School Community (CSC) program provide essential footing for you and your students when you have to process tragic events such as mass shootings, a death in the school community, or natural disaster. At such times, continuing with all parts of the CSC program and classroom routines will remind students that they are part of a caring community. Help the students use the skills they are learning in the program, such as recognizing their own emotions, to deal with the event. You might use the accompanying class meeting agenda to support discussion. Additionally, consider the following guidance for helping students cope during difficult times.

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. Use the grade-level guidelines below to determine the amount and kind of information to share. However, modify as needed based on knowledge of your students. 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.

- **Grades K–2.** Keep discussion of the event simple and general. Young students need only to know the most basic facts about these events. 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.

- **Grades 3–5.** Students in these grades will want and need more specific information than students in younger grades. Also anticipate that they will have heard more from TV, social media, and family about the events than will their younger peers. As a result, they may bring and share some inaccuracies, misunderstandings, or misinterpretation to the discussion. Do the research needed to be able to address such misstatements. During the discussion, share the basic facts about what happened, and then take questions so that you can clarify and correct any inaccuracies or misunderstandings. Avoid speculating on the causes of the incident. As with younger students, also share accounts of assistance, courage, or kindness that occurred, and when possible tie these accounts to values and skills students have learned through CSC.
**Grades 6–8.** Older students will want to process the event and what they have heard about it in much more detail and depth. They also may be more focused on the root causes of the event, particularly the possible failings, in their view, of adults to stop the event or events like it. Be prepared to discuss the event in detail, but still avoid going into too much graphic detail about any violence or injury. Leave time for students to vent their frustrations and concerns, encouraging them to do so using the conversation structures and social-emotional vocabulary developed through CSC. Share acts of heroism, assistance, and kindness as appropriate, but be careful to do so in a way that will not appear to adolescents to gloss over the tragedy itself.

**Reassure students of school safety measures.** Particularly when a school shooting has occurred, 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. For students in grades 5–8, remind them of steps that they can take to promote safety as well, such as telling adults if they see or hear of any troubling behavior by strangers or fellow students.

**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 or Advisory and ending the day with Closing Circle. Avoid changing the daily schedule if at all possible.

**Choose CSC Topic Weeks to meet students’ needs.** Many CSC weeks offer students a chance to discuss topics and practice skills that can be helpful to them in times of distress. For several weeks after a tragic event, choose weeks that will support students in grappling with a tragedy. The following topics, available in the *Teacher’s Manual* or *Topic Week* booklets, might be particularly helpful:

- **Grades 2–3:** Feelings and Challenges; Kindness; Alike and Different
- **Grades 4–5:** Feelings and Challenges; Kindness; Perseverance
- **Grades 6–8:** Kindness; Reducing Stress; Appreciating Diversity

**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 the calm, respectful, and caring approach called for in *Caring School Discipline*.

**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.

**Foster students’ sense of agency.** Tragic events can leave students of all ages, but particularly students in grades 5–8, feeling powerless and hopeless. Building on learning from CSC, remind students of steps they can take to make their own community a more positive and safe place. Support students in researching and taking other actions that they propose, such as writing letters to victims’ families or advocating for changes in laws.
**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.