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FRP Canada



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Winter | 2010, excerpt

Traumatized Neighbourhoods and Communities How Family Educators Can Help

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The newspapers seem to be full of headlines about neighbourhoods and communities devastated by traumatic events: an eight-year-old Ontario girl kidnapped and murdered; New Brunswick high school basketball players and the coach's wife killed in a car accident; three Quebec women killed when a snow-covered roof collapsed; a murder-suicide of four family members in northern Alberta.

Though the events are different, the aftermath is often the same. Traumatic events involving fatalities can profoundly affect residents of those communities and their relationships with their neighbours (Williams, Zinner, & Ellis, 1999). Depending upon the response to the trauma, a community's sense of connectedness and cohesion may increase or decrease, ultimately shaping the quality of life for families. My research has looked at three separate cases of violent trauma in Ontario and Quebec. Thanks to a grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, I have examined the impact of these events on the affected neighbourhood or community. Many of the interventions designed to assist people in these situations fall outside the realm of family education. Nonetheless, one consistent theme is directly linked to

parenting education practice: many parents do not have the skills or the confidence to be able to help their children understand, process, and cope with unexpected loss, especially the loss of peers.

Skills to cope

Bereavement support groups and death education programs are part of the broad field of family life education (Gross, 1993). As well, many of the skills that children and adolescents rely on to cope with loss play a part in all interpersonal relationships, for example, dealing with emotions, sharing feelings constructively, and communicating thoughts (Arcus, 1987). Therefore, it is important for parents to have the confidence and skills to be able to support their children through such a difficult time. In the words of one mother whose adolescent daughter had a best friend who was murdered, "... as a parent, you know how to deal with normal deaths... but as far as somebody is murdered, it is not something that we are used to dealing with."

Family Educators' role

Family educators can fill in this skills gap by providing information sessions to parents in the aftermath of a community-wide trauma. After the accidental death of a student, a

Books to support children through loss

General resources

Earl Grollman (1996). *Bereaved Children and Teens: A support guide for parents and professionals*

Ralph L. Klicker (1999). *A Student Dies, a School Mourns: Dealing with death and loss in the school community*

(You'll find excerpts from both of the above books on Google books.)

For school-age children

Dougy Center for Grieving Children (Ed.). (1999). *35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child*
www.doughy.org

Pam Heaney (2004). *Children's Grief: A guide for parents*

For tweens and teens

Mary Kelly Perschy (2004). *Helping Teens Work through Grief*

Alan Wolfelt (2001). *Healing a Teen's Grieving Heart: 100 practical ideas for families, friends and caregivers*

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school principal observed, “Some parents want to be the one, and rightly so, to be with their children when there’s a crisis.” Family educators can help parents by using the following suggestions and resources.

- **Empower parents to help their children.** While at first parents may be confused about how to help their children, they generally already possess many of the tools that they need for coping. Parents usually understand their children’s developmental readiness and know how much information their children can absorb and process. Family educators can assist families in recognizing their existing resourcefulness and resiliency, and help parents affirm their roles as teachers about loss and death.

- **Illustrate the key communication skills that can help children cope with loss and coach parents in how to support their children.** Begin by helping parents acknowledge how this event has affected them. By **identifying and coping with their own feelings**, parents can be much more effective as supports for their children. However, this does not mean that parents need to hide their grief. Parents’ tears show their children that crying is a natural reaction to emotional pain and loss. Children can then be more comfortable sharing their own feelings. Children do need to know, though, that they are safe and cared for, no matter how sad the adults may feel.

It is important for parents to be as **honest as possible** with their children and to encourage questions. This can be particularly difficult in cases of trauma when details may be even more upsetting. Discuss with parents what information it is appropriate to disclose to their children. Parents especially need to know how to create an atmosphere of comfort, reassurance and openness, as well

as to give the message that there’s no right or wrong way to feel.

The **ability to listen** is one of the most important skills for parents. They can encourage children to express their feelings by talking, in writing, or through art. Children need to know how to name their feelings, how to express them, and that their feelings are okay. Arguing with children about how they feel, convincing them to “get over it,” or expecting them to be “grown-up,” “strong and brave” or tough can be counterproductive. The best way to respond is to empathize about how frightening and sad this event was. Children need space, patience, sensitivity and understanding as they find their own way to grieve. Grieving is a process, not an event, and each child approaches it in his or her own unique way.

Encourage parents to also **share their spiritual beliefs, cultural practices and values** with their children. Facing traumatic events that impact on a community can bring individuals, both adults and children, face to face with “meaning-of-life” questions.

Confirm for parents the importance of communicating their **love and support explicitly** to their children. The unexpected death of a peer can awaken children’s sense of their own vulnerability.

- **Tap the strength of community.** Organize groups of parents to provide peer support and to share the wisdom of their experience. This can build parents’ confidence in their ability to support their children, so that they can be the secure anchors their children need most.

- **Alert parents to signs that professional services may be in their child’s best interest.** Though many children, with time, will regain their

emotional balance, some may need extra help and support. Children who appear emotionally numb, very depressed, have persistent sleep or eating disturbances, exhibit radical changes in behaviour, or engage in dangerous or risky behaviour (drug and alcohol abuse, fighting, and sexual experimentation) could benefit from professional support. Paediatricians, school social workers, and mental health professionals attached to community organizations can provide assistance, recommendations and referrals.

- **Have a resource list for parents to consult.** The U.S. National Institute of Mental Health publishes a useful booklet called “Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Violence and Disasters: What parents can do.” (www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/children-and-adolescents-listing.shtml) The sidebar on page one lists a few of the many other resources that family educators can share with parents. As well, there are numerous works of fiction that parents can use to start discussion with their children. Ask your local librarian for appropriate titles.

Parents cannot protect their children from experiencing sadness and loss, but they can help them to develop the skills and emotional resilience they need to successfully navigate times of unexpected losses. These are capacities that children can rely on throughout their entire lives. □

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