

Big Situations – Stories for Reflection

Loss and Grief



This story refers to the death of an educator and may raise big feelings. Before you read this, make sure this is the right time for you, and that you can access support for yourself if you need it. Should any of the information in this document cause distress for you, it may be helpful to contact Lifeline on 13 11 14, Beyond Blue on 1300 224 636 or the Kids Helpline on 1800 551 800.

Read this story to help you be better prepared to respond to loss, or if you have already encountered a situation like this and you want to hear about other educators' experiences. This is a fictional story informed by real experiences. If you are facing a situation like this now, you can find [Tips for responding now](#) and resources to support children, parents and educators in the [Big Situations](#) section of the NSW/ACT Inclusion Agency website.

When an educator dies

One of my colleagues, Farah, was 56 when she collapsed at work. She'd been a bit quiet, but no one realised she was unwell. While we were helping Farah and calling 000, one of the educators got the children into the other room, and quickly explained to the rest of the team what was happening. We told the children that Farah was sick, and we needed to call an ambulance to help her. We explained we needed to give Farah a quiet space, and room for the ambulance workers to come. We all moved together to another room.

Some of the children were crying and openly upset, some of them were subdued, and not really playing and others seemed similar to usual. We answered the questions the children asked. We explained the ambulance officers were here to help her, and they would take her to hospital to see a doctor. We started some activities down the far side of the room and redirected the children, so they weren't watching through the window when they took Farah out to the ambulance. They had the sirens on, and we explained to the children this was so they could get Farah to the hospital quickly. The children talked about their own experiences with ambulances, either on the road, or going to hospital themselves.

We didn't have a chance to send out information to parents, but we explained to them what had happened when the children were collected, and said we'd let everyone know how Farah was doing. When we heard that Farah had died, an email was sent to the families to share the news. We included some information about how to talk to children about when someone has died.

Next day, children were talking about Farah. We had conversations with small groups of children. We used simple, factual language, saying that Farah had a problem with her heart, and when it stopped working the doctors hadn't been able to get it started again. We kept the routines the same as usual, and just responded to the children's questions as they came up. This helped both the children and us, because when the children talked about feeling sad about Farah, we could say we felt sad too, because Farah had been a good friend.

We had a lovely photo of Farah, and we put that up on the noticeboard. We followed the family's lead, and let people know that the family suggested donations to a charity that Farah had supported, if they wanted to. We also asked Farah's family about some of the team attending the funeral and they really wanted some of us there. We talked as a team about who wanted to go and also shared information about the funeral with parents. We thought it would be best for the children if the service stayed open that day, so we couldn't all go. We organised casuals so the team members closest to Farah could attend the funeral.

I made sure that all educators were aware of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and some of the team said that they found that very helpful.

Different families had told their children different things, depending on their beliefs. Some of the children talked about Farah being in heaven, and some said she was like a star looking down on them. Mostly this was fine, but when two of the children started to argue about who was right, we talked about how people think differently about what happens when you die, and that was okay.

When families heard that Farah had died, they brought in flowers. One of the educators did a project with some of the children, decorating a glass jar for the flowers and the children decided they wanted the words 'Farah's vase' on it. So, without planning it, they created a special memorial to Farah which we still use when someone brings flowers.

Things to think about:

- ▶ Using your knowledge of child development and inclusion, think about some ways in which children's experiences of loss and grief may differ from those of adults.
- ▶ What strengths do you think you (and your team) would bring in an experience of loss and grief like the one in the story?
- ▶ Think about your work context and the needs of the children you are including. How might your experiences be similar or different to those in the story, if an educator died?
- ▶ Who could you call on if you needed information or someone to talk to if you experienced the death of a team member?
- ▶ How can policies and procedures support your responses and planning? Do you need to develop or review policies or procedures?

The following resources can help you be better prepared for critical incidents:

- ▶ [National Mental Health Education Initiative](#) (Be You)
Access professional learning modules for educators or to get the most benefit from Be You, sign up your service to create a learning community and access a Be You consultant from Early Childhood Australia.
- ▶ [Community Trauma Toolkit for Educators](#) (Emerging Minds)
Access short courses and resources to help educators support children following a disaster or community trauma.

Note: See additional resources on the [Loss and Grief](#) and [Critical Incidents](#) pages of the Big Situations online resource.

Please remember:

An Inclusion Professional can support educators to proactively prepare to have the skills and confidence to respond to big situations that may occur. This preparation could include support to use the [Big Situations](#) resource and may involve strategic inclusion planning. It should be noted that big situations often require support from experts that sit outside the role and expertise of the Inclusion Professional. Inclusion Professionals can help you connect with external organisations and agencies as needed.

Disclaimer:

This is a fictional story informed by real experiences to support you to reflect and plan for the future. If you would like support or have any feedback on this resource please [contact us](#).