



# EFFINGHAM UNIT DISTRICT 40

*Mark E. Doan, Superintendent*

## PRESS RELEASE

September 10, 2013

Re: Passing of student, Willow Long

The entire Unit #40 family is extremely saddened by the passing of South Side School student, Willow Long. We want to thank everyone for their thoughts and prayers for Willow.

The safety and social well-being of our students is a priority at Unit #40. We implemented our Crisis Intervention Team beginning Monday, September 9<sup>th</sup> at all elementary schools in the District. We will continue with these team members in place to support both our students and staff for the foreseeable future.

For many of our students school provides a routine that they appreciate. Therefore, the District is trying to provide a sense of normalcy, but also allowing students to share their feelings in a safe and supporting environment. The District feels that the understanding of the issues and grief process is best addressed in the home by parents. Attached documents were provided to help in that process (attached).

Superintendent Mark Doan stated, "The outpouring of support and help during this event was overwhelming. It is truly a blessing to live in a community and area that can come together for a common purpose. We continue to ask for everyone's prayers for Willow, her family, classmates, and teachers as we move forward."

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark E. Doan".

Mark E. Doan, Superintendent  
Effingham Unit #40

**"IN SEARCH OF EXCELLENCE"**

2803 South Banker • P.O. Box 130 • Effingham, Illinois 62401 • 217/540-1500



# EFFINGHAM UNIT DISTRICT 40

*Mark E. Doan, Superintendent*

September 10, 2013

Dear Unit 40 Parents and/or Guardians,

It is with deep regret that we inform you about a recent loss to our school community. On September 10, 2013, it was confirmed that Willow Long, a South Side School student, has passed away. This loss is sure to raise many emotions, concerns, and questions for our entire school and especially our students. We have made every effort to keep this sensitive information to a minimum at school as we feel that this is something that should be addressed in the home.

The school district has a crisis intervention team, made up of professionals trained to help with the needs of students, parents, and school personnel at difficult times such as this. This team will be available for as long as necessary.

We have enclosed information that may be useful for you in helping your child at home. If you would like additional information or need assistance please feel free to contact your child's school.

We are saddened by the loss to our school community and will make every effort to help you and your child.

Sincerely,  
Amy Niebrugge

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A young child's first encounter with death can be very significant. When a child mentions the topic of death, adults should drop everything and listen. "I'm so sorry. Tell me what happened" opens the door for the child to ventilate. In order to acknowledge the significance of the death, ask the child to share a few special memories of the person who died. The adult might then share how she felt when he or she experienced a similar death. Reassure the child that death is sad and can be frightening for people of all ages, and that adults have difficulties facing it too.

Tips for providing positive emotional support for grieving children:

- Explain that death is not like sleep. Children often worry that they will not wake up.
- Explain that physical death is final. This may be difficult for your child to understand.
- Explain that death is not punishment. Neither the child nor the deceased is being punished for anything that they have done.
- Provide security. Children may worry that another special person will also die. The child should know that there will always be someone to care for him or her.
- Assure the child that he/she is not the cause. The child may feel that he/she was the reason the person died.
- Listen carefully. Let the child talk about what they want to talk about. You don't have to agree. When your child asks you a question, make sure you know what the child is really asking. Ask questions if you aren't sure and/or restate the question your child asked.
- Allow all feelings. There are no "wrong" feelings, but there is unacceptable behavior. Encourage talking, not acting out. Some children may show little to no emotion or connection to the deceased.
- Let the child lead the discussion. Do NOT devote lengthy amounts of time in discussing death. Allow the child to initiate and end the conversation at his level.
- Relate to the child on his or her level. Use words and concepts that are right for the age and development of the child.

Helpful websites on grief:

[www.rainbows.org](http://www.rainbows.org)

[www.safeplacetogrieve.com](http://www.safeplacetogrieve.com)

[www.kidsplace.org](http://www.kidsplace.org)

[www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)

[www.juliesplace.com](http://www.juliesplace.com)

[www.hospicecares.org](http://www.hospicecares.org)

Books for children about death:

*When Dinosaurs Die* by L. Brown and M. Brown

*Sad Isn't Bad* by Michaelene Mundy

*A Bunch of Balloons* by D. Ferguson

*I Miss You* by Pat Thomas

As always, feel free to contact your child's school if we can assist you in any way.

In reference to the School Reach messages, listed below are tips for talking to children following a distressing event:

- ❖ **Don't project your fears onto your children. They take their cues from the adults around them.**
  - It's okay to show emotion after an event. We ought to model to children that feeling sad and upset is normal after the event. But we don't want to overwhelm them with our emotions, or put them in the position of having to 'parent' the adults around them. Make sure you also model taking care of yourself.
  
- ❖ **Try to limit their access to the recurring news and exposure to the event.**
  - Do not overwhelm children with too much information. Too much exposure to media accounts can fuel their fear, so don't let them sit and watch the news over and over. Better yet, set the example of not doing so yourself as well.
  
- ❖ **Understand that you can't completely shield them from what happened. If you do wish to relay the information, model truth-telling and build trust with your children by letting them hear things, even hard things, from you directly. Keep your statements simple, factual, clear and sensitively worded.**
  - It would be next to impossible to hide these events from children, as much as we wish we could. You might be able to shield your own child in your home, for example, by not turning on a television, but you can't protect your children from hearing about it from other kids. The fact is, they will hear about it, so although they don't "need" to know about it, pretending we can shield them is magical thinking.
  - That said, you don't need to give them more information than they can handle, or more than they're asking for. A simple, "Did they talk about what happened at school?" would be a good starter. They need to know that you're not trying to hide the truth from them, that you're open to talking about it, but that you're also not forcing them to do so.
  
- ❖ **Maintain daily routines to the extent possible. Now is not the time to introduce new routines. Familiar schedules can be reassuring.**
  
- ❖ **Be alert to changes in the student's usual behavior (e.g., drop in grades, loss of interest, not doing homework, increased sleepiness or distraction, isolating themselves, weight loss or gain).**
  
- ❖ **Reassure younger students that they are safe and that their parents and other adults will take care of them. Counselors are available in each of the schools if needed.**

## DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES & CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO GRIEF

Approximate Developmental Age	Grief Reactions	Helpful Approaches
Infant to 2 yrs.	General distress, sleeplessness, shock, despair, protest. Child responds to parental grief.	A consistent nurturing figure to take the place of the mother/father. Include in funeral rituals.
Ages 2-5 yrs.	Confusion, agitation at night, frightening dreams, regression. Child often understands that a profound event has occurred. May seem unaffected. Repeated questioning. Child's understanding of death is limited.	Simple, honest words and phrases. Reassurance. Secure, loving environment. Draw, read books, play together. Include in funeral rituals.
Ages 5-8 yrs.	Wants to understand about death in a concrete way but thinks "it won't happen to them." Denial, anger, sorrow. General distress, disoriented, confused. May behave as though nothing has happened. Desire to conform with peers. May ask questions repeatedly. May need physical activity on a regular basis.	Simple, honest words and phrases. Answer questions simply and honestly. Look for confused thinking. Offer physical outlets. Reassurance about the future. Draw, read books, play together. Include in funeral rituals.
Ages 8-12 yrs.	Shock, denial, anxiety, distress. Facade of coping. Finality of death understood, phobic behavior, morbid curiosity, peer conformity. May need physical activity on a regular basis.	Answer questions directly and honestly. Offer reassurance about future. Create times to talk about feelings. Offer physical outlets. Reading. Include in funeral plans and rituals.
Adolescents	Shock, anxiety, distress, denial, anger, depression, withdrawing, aggression. May react similarly to adult but have less coping mechanisms. May feel young, vulnerable and need to talk. Uses humor.	Allow and encourage ventilation of feelings, encourage peer support. Groups are helpful as are appropriate readings. Invoke other supportive adults. Maintain consistent environment. Include in funeral plans and rituals, encourage involvement in family.

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