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# Death and Grief: Supporting Children and Youth

Death and loss within a school community can affect anyone, particularly children and adolescents. Whether the death of a classmate, family member, or staff member, students may need support in coping with their grief. Reactions will vary depending on the circumstances of the death and how well-known the deceased is both to individual students and to the school community at-large. Students who have lost a family member or someone close to them will need particular attention. It is important for adults to understand the reactions they may observe and to be able to identify children or adolescents who require support. Parents, teachers, and other caregivers should also understand how their own grief reactions and responses to a loss may impact the experience of a child.

## **GRIEF REACTIONS**

There is no right or wrong way to react to a loss. No two individuals will react in exactly the same way. Grief reactions among children and adolescents are influenced by their developmental level, personal characteristics, mental health, family and cultural influences, and previous exposure to crisis, death, and loss. However, some general trends exist that can help adults understand typical and atypical reactions of bereaved children. Sadness, confusion, and anxiety are among the most common grief responses and are likely to occur for children of all ages.

## **The Grief Process**

Although grief does not follow a specified pattern, there are common stages that children and adolescents may experience with varying sequencing and intensity. The general stages of the grief process are:

- Denial (unwillingness to discuss the loss)
- Anger or guilt (blaming others for the loss)
- Sorrow or depression (loss of energy, appetite, or interest in activities)
- Bargaining (attempts to regain control by making promises or changes in one's life)
- Acceptance or admission (acceptance that loss is final, real, significant, and painful)

## **Grief Reactions of Concern**

The above behaviors are expected and natural reactions to a loss. However, the following behaviors may warrant further attention:

### **Preschool Level:**

- Decreased verbalization
- Increased anxiety (e.g., clinginess, fear of separation)
- Regressive behaviors (e.g., bedwetting, thumb sucking)

### **Elementary school level:**

- Difficulty concentrating or inattention
- Somatic complaints (e.g., headaches, stomach problems)
- Sleep disturbances (e.g., nightmares, fear of the dark)
- Repeated telling and acting out of the event
- Withdrawal
- Increased irritability, disruptive behavior, or aggressive behavior
- Increased anxiety (e.g., clinging, whining)
- Depression, guilt, or anger

**Middle and high school level:**

- Flashbacks
- Emotional numbing or depression
- Nightmares
- Avoidance or withdrawal
- Peer relationship problems
- Substance abuse or other high-risk behavior

**Signs That Additional Help Is Needed**

Adults should be particularly alert to any of the following as indicators that trained mental health professional (school psychologist or counselor) should be consulted for intervention and possible referral:

- Severe loss of interest in daily activities (e.g., extracurricular activities and friends)
- Disruption in ability to eat or sleep
- School refusal
- Fear of being alone
- Repeated wish to join the deceased
- Severe drop in school achievement
- Suicidal references or behavior

**Risk Factors for Increased Reactions**

Some students (and adults) may be a greater risk for grief reactions that require professional intervention. This includes individuals who:

- Were very close to the person(s) who died
- Were present when the person died
- Have suffered a recent loss
- Have experienced a traumatic event
- Are isolated or lack a personal support network
- Suffer from depression, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, or other mental illness

Keep in mind that groups, particularly adolescents, can experience collective or even vicarious grief. Students may feel grief, anxiety or stress because they see classmates who were directly affected by a loss, even if they didn't personally know the deceased. Additional risk factors include the deceased being popular or well-known, extensive media coverage, a sudden or traumatic death, homicides or suicides.

**SUPPORTING GRIEVING CHILDREN AND YOUTH**

How adults in a family or school community grieve following a loss will influence how children and youth grieve. When adults are able to talk about the loss, express their feelings, and provide support for children and youth in the aftermath of a loss, they are better able to develop healthy coping strategies. Adults are encouraged to:

- Talk about the loss. This gives children permission to talk about it, too.
- Ask questions to determine how children understand the loss, and gauge their physical and emotional reactions.
- Listen patiently. Remember that each person is unique and will grieve in his or her own way.
- Be prepared to discuss the loss repeatedly. Children should be encouraged to talk about, act out, or express through writing or art the details of the loss as well as their feelings about it, about the deceased person, and about other changes that have occurred in their lives as a result of the loss.
- Give children important facts about the event at an appropriate developmental level. This may include helping children accurately understand what death is. For younger children, this explanation might include helping them to understand that the person's body has stopped working and will never again work.
- Help children understand the death and intervene to correct false perceptions about the cause of the event, ensuring that they do not blame themselves or others for the situation.
- Provide a model of healthy mourning by being open about your own feelings of sadness and grief.
- Create structure and routine for children so they experience predictability and stability.

- Take care of yourself so you can assist the children and adolescents in your care. Prolonged, intense grieving or unhealthy grief reactions (such as substance abuse) will inhibit your ability to provide adequate support.
- Acknowledge that it will take time to mourn and that bereavement is a process that occurs over months and years. Be aware that normal grief reactions often last longer than six months, depending on the type of loss and proximity to the child.
- Take advantage of school and community resources such as counseling, especially if children and youth do not seem to be coping well with grief and loss.

### **TIPS FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS WITH GRIEVING FRIENDS AND CLASSMATES**

Seeing a friend try to cope with a loss may scare or upset children who have had little or no experience with death and grieving. Some suggestions teachers and parents can provide to children and youth to deal with this "secondary" loss:

- Particularly with younger children, it will be important to help clarify their understanding of death. See tips above under "helping children cope."
- Seeing their classmates' reactions to loss may bring about some fears of losing their own parents or siblings. Children need reassurance from caretakers and teachers that their own families are safe. For children who have experienced their own loss (previous death of a parent, grandparent, sibling), observing the grief of a friend can bring back painful memories. These children are at greater risk for developing more serious stress reactions and should be given extra support as needed.
- Children (and many adults) need help in communicating condolence or comfort messages. Provide children with age-appropriate guidance for supporting their peers. Help them decide what to say (e.g., "Steve, I am so sorry about your father. I know you will miss him very much. Let me know if I can help you with your paper route...") and what to expect (see "expressions of grief" above).
- Help children anticipate some changes in friends' behavior. It is important that children understand that their grieving friends may act differently, may withdraw from their friends for a while, might seem angry or very sad, etc., but that this does not mean a lasting change in their relationship.
- Explain to children that their "regular" friendship may be an important source of support for friends and classmates. Even normal social activities such as inviting a friend over to play, going to the park, playing sports, watching a movie, or a trip to the mall may offer a much needed distraction and sense of connection and normalcy.
- Children need to have some options for providing support—it will help them deal with their fears and concerns if they have some concrete actions that they can take to help. Suggest making cards, drawings, helping with chores or homework, etc. Older teens might offer to help the family with some shopping, cleaning, errands, etc., or with babysitting for younger children.
- Encourage children who are worried about a friend to talk to a caring adult. This can help alleviate their own concern or potential sense of responsibility for making their friend feel better. Children may also share important information about a friend who is at risk of more serious grief reactions.
- Parents and teachers need to be alert to children in their care who may be reacting to a friend's loss of a loved one. These children will need some extra support to help them deal with the sense of frustration and helplessness that many people are feeling at this time.

Adapted from "Death and Grief in the Family: Tips for Parents" in *Helping Children at Home and School III*, NASP, 2010 and from materials posted on the NASP website after September 11, 2001.

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## Tips for Parents

Here are some ideas for how you might support your children:

- This event might bring up questions, concerns or fears for your child.
- Be sensitive about whether s/he wants or needs to talk.
- Bring it up in case s/he is reluctant to do so.
- Ask about his/her reactions to this, and **accept those feelings as stated!** Resist the temptation to minimize the pain, deny the feelings or give advice. **Simply listen!**

Helpful responses on your part:

- "Tell me more about that."
- "Have you ever felt that way before?"
- "I wonder if there are other things that are worrying you?"
- Be concrete and brief in your answers, especially with younger children. Allow some silence and processing time after a statement.
- **Do not compare death with sleep or any other state of consciousness.** Sleep is a regenerative process necessary to health. Death is the loss of all life and regenerative processes. Kids often end up sleep deprived because of fear that they'll die, too, if we use this comparison.
- Allow for regressive behaviors.
- Be especially emotionally available and nonjudgmental.
- Realize that kids move in and out of the grief process, but it is very intense for them when they're experiencing the sadness / anxiety / fear. Encourage them to go out and have fun, get noisy, be active, and celebrate life in whatever way they can. Those periods of reprieve are important in sustaining health and in recovery. Allow them to move in and out of grieving at their own pace.
- Remember the importance of humor, laughter, joking.

*\*(Adapted from Crisis Management Institute)*

**East Building Question/Answer Sheet re. Crisis Plan (from Dr. Kaufmann and Dr. Bickford 2/17/15)**

**1. Would we call in extra subs to be available for teachers if they need a moment or need to talk with EAP Support Person?**

- No, we would cover with district/building staff. But we are planning to have Kara's office open and staffed for this purpose.

**2. How many people are part of the IU Team?**

- I have a voice message in to the IU Crisis Team coordinator to inquire.

**3. Is it OK to mention "suicide" if students ask?**

- Our response can be that we understand, per blog, that the injury was self-inflicted. It is really OK to tell kids that that is all we know. We don't know why. We are sad and confused too. Acknowledge the feelings that they have are feelings we all share. If they express feelings of guilt they should see one of the counselors or support people to talk about that. (You can affirm that we all feel guilty and wish we would have known he was suffering so that we could have intervened and helped more. You can acknowledge that even the grownups didn't recognize any signs that this might happen, and sometimes there just aren't signs. But we should have many experienced professionals on hand in the library to process with students. Per recommendation of consultants, the best thing teachers can do is keep the normal structure and consistency going in the classroom (while still acknowledging and affirming the feelings of students)

**4. Determination of safe room?**

- Designate library as immediate space. If more is needed later in day or following day the gym could be identified as place to set up stations. First gauge the # of students who will want to use this resource. Library is a better starting place for meeting with professionals due to tables, comfortable seating, etc.

**5. How will staff be notified?**

- If we get information during the evening, Mr. Terch will send a school reach call to staff. The call will only be announcing a faculty meeting for the following morning. If we get information during the day, there would be a faculty meeting at the end of the school day for staff. The plan for the day will be outlined at this meeting.

**6. How will the information be communicated to students?**

- During the faculty meeting a statement will be given to staff to read to homerooms. This would likely be occurring in the homeroom at the end of the school day. However, if we receive information prior to the start of school we may want to deliver the information during homeroom at the start of the day, as it is likely students may be

arriving already knowing. Letters will also be given to homeroom teachers (written and signed by superintendent) that will go home with the student. The letter will reference how to get information regarding the services (if it is not yet determined) and how parents can get additional assistance for their children if needed. If HR teachers are not comfortable reading this message they should request support from the office and another staff member (from SEDS or from IU) will come in and do this for you.

## Appendix B

### *Sample Letter to parents after a death*

Dear Parent,

A very sad thing has happened in our school community. On (date) one of our (students, staff), (name), died after (event). According to (his family, the police), (tell what happened to cause the death). We are all profoundly saddened by (his, her) death.

We have shared this information with your child at school today and had discussions with all of the children in their homerooms. Guidance, the nurse, support staff and I will continue to be available to students, teachers and parents. Please contact the school if you have any questions or concerns.

As a parent, you may want to talk with your child about death because it impacts each person in different ways. How children will react will depend upon their relationship with the person who died, their age and their experience with death.

Your child may:

- Appear unaffected
- Ask questions about death repeatedly
- Be angry and aggressive
- Be withdrawn and moody
- Be sad or depressed
- Become afraid
- Have difficulty eating or sleeping

We suggest that you make time to listen and allow them to talk. Answer their questions simply, honestly and be prepared to answer the same questions repeatedly.

*(optional)* A Parent Informational Night is planned for (date time and place). At that time, we will have resources available about how to help children in grief.

Our thoughts are with (family name).

Sincerely,



## Appendices

(available on disk)

### Appendix A

*Sample scripts for classroom announcements*

- **Accident or general death**

I have some very sad news to share today. Jane Doe, a student in Ms. Smith's class, was hit by a car while waiting for the bus in front of her house yesterday morning. She died at the hospital last night. I am feeling pretty sad and would like to take some time to talk about how you are and answer any questions you might have.

- **Suicide**

I would like to share some very sad news with you. Mr. Smith died yesterday at his home. He killed himself by hanging. I know there will be lots of questions about his suicide and why he did it. Suicide is a very hard death to understand, and there are all kinds of questions, the most frequent is "Why?" We can all talk about it and answer some of the questions.

- **Violent Death**

I have something sad to share with you. Jane Doe, a student in grade 6 has been missing for 2 days. The police found her body last night in the field behind her house. She had been strangled and the police are considering her death a homicide. They have arrested her neighbor and charged him with murder. When someone is murdered it is very scary for all of us. We will be providing an opportunity for you to talk about the death and share your concerns, fears and questions.

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## For Teachers: Dealing with Grieving Students in Your Class

The following steps help support the grieving students as well as prepare your class for making the grieving student feel comfortable and supported:

1. **Talk with the bereaved student before she returns.** Ask her what she wants the class to know about the death, funeral arrangements, etc. If possible, call the family prior to the student's return to school so that you can let her know you are thinking of her and want to help make her return to school as supportive as possible.
2. **Talk to your class about how grief affects people and encourage them to share how they feel.** One way to do this is to discuss what other types of losses or deaths the students in your class have experienced, and what helped them cope.
3. **Discuss how difficult it may be for their classmate to return to school, and how they may be of help.** You can ask your class for ideas about how they would like others to treat them if they were returning to school after a death, pointing out differences in preferences. Some students might like to be left alone; others want the circumstances discussed freely. Most grieving students say that they want everyone to treat them the same way that they treated them before. As a rule, they don't like people being "extra nice." While students usually say they don't want to be in the spotlight, they also don't want people acting like nothing happened.
4. **Provide a way for your class to reach out to the grieving classmate and his or her family.** One of the ways that students can reach out is by sending cards or pictures to the child and family, letting them know the class is thinking of them. If students in your class knew the person who died, they could share memories of that person.
5. **Provide flexibility and support to your grieving student upon his or her return to class.** Recognize that your student will have difficulty concentrating and focusing on school work. Allow the bereaved student to leave the class when she needs some quiet or alone time. Make sure that the student has a person available to talk with, such as a school counselor.

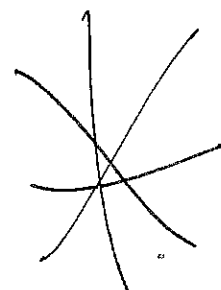
### DOs and DON'Ts with Grieving Students

- **DO listen.** Grieving students need a safe, trusted adult who will listen to them
- **DO follow routines.** Routines provide a sense of safety which is very comforting to the grieving student.
- **DO set limits.** Just because students are grieving, doesn't mean that the rules do not apply. When grieving, students may experience lapses in concentration or exhibit risk taking behavior. Setting clear limits provides a more secure and safer environment for everyone under these circumstances.
- **DO NOT** suggest that the student has grieved long enough.
- **DO NOT** indicate that the student should get over it and move on.
- **DO NOT** act as if nothing has happened.
- **DO NOT** say things like:
  - "It could be worse. You still have one brother."
  - "I know how you feel."
  - "You'll be stronger because of this."
- **DO NOT** expect the student to complete all assignments on a timely basis.

As a teacher, you have the opportunity to touch children's lives in a very special way. Your actions have a lifelong impact. When a death influences the lives of your students, you and your school, can make a life-long difference by creating an environment for healing and support.

These lessons have been excerpted from the book *Helping the Grieving Student: A Guide for Teachers*.

Put  
back of  
statement  
read to  
students



*Sample Letter to parents after a suicide death*

Dear Parent,

I have some very sad news to share with you. We learned last night that John Doe, an eighth grade student in our school, died by suicide. According to police reports, (state facts of death). We have shared this information with the students in their first period class this morning. We hope you will be able to talk with your son or daughter about the death.

Suicide is a difficult death for most people to understand and accept because it raises many unanswered questions. We can never really know why a person kills himself. There can be a variety of factors that lead to an individual's suicide death. Sometimes friends of the suicide victim wonder if they could have prevented the death. Others may feel it was their fault. It is important that students have an opportunity to communicate about these concerns and receive help if they need it.

Counselors, teachers and other staff have been and will continue to be available for the students, parents and teachers to talk about their thoughts, feelings and concerns. Please contact us at school if we can help.

A meeting will be held (date, time, place). It is open to parents, students and staff. A berevment counselor will be presenting information on suicide issues, including symptoms to watch for and prevention efforts. Please plan to attend.

Our thoughts are with John's family as they deal with their son's death.

Sincerely,