



Death and Grief in the Family: Providing Support at School

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Loss is a natural and expected part of life. Before reaching adulthood, the majority of children and adolescents will experience the loss of a close or special person. Therefore, it is very important for educators and staff at all levels to have a strong understanding of the ways in which they can support grieving students. This includes having a solid understanding of expected grief reactions as well as the ability to identify reactions or behaviors that are indicative of unhealthy mourning. School personnel should be aware of the resources available for bereaved students at their school sites as well as in their communities, and be ready and willing to direct both students and families to needed support.

WHAT ARE TYPICAL GRIEF REACTIONS?

It is important to remember that there is no right or wrong way for children and adolescents to react to a loss, and that no two children are expected to react in exactly the same way. Grief reactions among children and adolescents can be highly variable and are influenced by several factors, including students' developmental level and/or the presence of mental health challenges or disabilities. For example, children with exceptional needs may possess fewer coping strategies, making their reactions similar to those expected in younger children. The nature of the loss may also have a great impact on a child's reaction. Factors such as traumatic or unexpected deaths, the loss of multiple family members, suicide, and homicide are associated with stronger negative grief reactions. Additionally, children can be impacted by the variety of associated life changes that may occur as a result of the loss, including a move, a change in the family's financial situation, or the impaired caregiving abilities of the surviving parent or guardian.

While heterogeneity is expected in grief reactions, some general trends exist that can help teachers and other school staff understand typical and atypical reactions of bereaved children. Sadness, confusion, and anxiety are among the most common grief responses and are likely to be observed in children of all ages and ability levels. In contrast, the following reactions (listed with the ages most likely to exhibit them) may warrant further attention:

Preschool Level

Young children are generally unable to directly express their emotions. Adults should be alert to the following symptoms:

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

Elementary School Level

Although more able to express feelings with words, school-age children more readily communicate grief responses through changes in behavior including the following:

- 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
- A decrease in academic performance or school attendance

Middle and High School Level

Teenagers exhibit grief symptoms more like those of adults, with less experience and less developed coping skills. Their symptoms might include:

- Flashbacks
- Emotional numbing or depression
- Nightmares
- Avoidance or withdrawal
- Peer relationship problems
- Substance abuse or other high-risk behaviors
- A decrease in academic performance or school attendance

HOW CAN SCHOOLS SUPPORT BEREAVED CHILDREN?

In the event of a death in the family, children will likely experience reactions of grief and loss that affect their school success. Many of the reactions noted above may have negative consequences on classroom behaviors and academic achievement. School personnel can help to support children during these difficult times. After a loss, students will likely need some support to help them cope with their feelings, as well as to adjust back into the routine of school.

Levels of Support

Fortunately, schools have many levels of support available to children who have experienced a loss:

Level 1. Support at this level is based on caring, supportive relationships or friendships and is not therapeutic. Naturally occurring support systems such as teachers, parents, friends, and community members help students deal with their grief. School counselors, school psychologists, and school nurses can also provide assistance. School staff should be made aware of healthy and unhealthy grief reactions so students who require additional levels of assistance may be identified.

Level 2. Support at this level contains psychoeducational interventions and potentially therapeutic interventions. While teachers can help facilitate psychoeducational interventions, trained mental health staff, including school

psychologists, counselors, and/or school social workers with knowledge of grief counseling may provide individual and/or group counseling.

Level 3. Support at this level is highly therapeutic and provided for severely grief-impaired youth. Treatment at this level will be conducted by those with highly specialized training in this area and may be provided outside of the school context. Care at this level is often provided by school psychologists, licensed clinical social workers, marriage and family therapists, clinical psychologists, or psychiatrists.

Preparing to Assist When Needed

As grief and loss are natural and expected parts of life, schools must expect that a percentage of their students will be affected by the death of a loved one each year. Schools can take several steps to ensure they are prepared to assist children who experience a loss.

- *Teach all staff basic information about grief and loss.* Make sure they understand that grief is a natural and expected reaction to the loss of a loved one. Inform them of the developmental stages associated with grief responses. Encourage them to view each child's grief and mourning as unique.
- *Provide information about cultural sensitivity to grief reactions.* School staff may need information that takes into account the culture of the individual family or the community. Give guidance when needed regarding culturally appropriate responses to death.
- *Prepare staff to answer questions.* School staff should be comfortable discussing death as a normal and healthy part of life. Misinformation (e.g., "She just fell asleep") is not helpful and can confuse and scare children. Staff members who interact with children experiencing grief should be prepared to answer questions and encourage children to express their feelings.
- *Teach staff to watch out for signs of intense, prolonged, or unhealthy grief reactions.* Teachers, school psychologists, nurses, counselors, social workers, and administrative staff are all in excellent positions to identify children who may require additional assistance
- *Inform teachers and staff that certain behaviors are expected.* Children may be distracted, tired, impatient, forgetful, or have difficulty concentrating in the classroom setting. These reactions, and others such as recurring headaches or stomachaches, should be viewed as a natural part of the grieving process and children should not be punished for them. However, if symptoms do not subside over time, a referral should be made to a school-based mental health professional who can provide the student with additional support and resources.

Signs That Additional Help Is Needed

School personnel should be particularly alert to any of the following as indicators that trained mental health staff should be consulted for intervention and possible referral:

- Severe loss of interest in daily activities (e.g., play 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

Individual Counseling

Upon returning to school after a loss in the family, some children and adolescents may need intensive, one-to-one counseling support. This may be especially true if students display intense or unhealthy grief reactions (such as those noted above) or engage in high-risk behavior. Individual treatment should focus on both the affective and the cognitive aspects of the loss, as well as on promoting coping at school and at home. It is important that, whenever possible, parents or other family members be included in grief counseling.

Group Counseling

Group counseling can also help children and adolescents cope more effectively with grief and loss. It is important that school-based mental health professionals identify students who have similar needs and use developmentally appropriate activities to help them understand and cope with feelings of grief and loss. Several structured group curricula for grief and loss are available. Many of these programs have versions for multiple age levels, and most provide outlines, routines, and activities for groups lasting 10–12 weeks.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Print

- Auman, M. (2007). Bereavement support for children. *Journal of School Nursing, 23*(1), 34–39.
- Black, S. (2005). When children grieve. *American School Board Journal, 192*(8), 28–30.

Brock, S. E., Nickerson, A. B., Reeves, M. A., Jimerson, S. R., Lieberman, R. A., & Feinberg, T. A. (2009). *School crisis prevention and intervention: The PREPaRE model*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Brock, S. E., Lazarus, P. J., & Jimerson, S. R. (Eds.). (2002). *Best practices in school crisis prevention and intervention*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Fiorini, J., & Mullen, J. (2006). *Counseling children and adolescents through grief and loss*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

Lehmann, L., Jimerson, S. R., & Gaasch, A. (2001). *Mourning child grief support group curriculum*. Philadelphia: Brunner-Routledge. Available: <http://www.routledge.com>

Preschool, early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescent editions are available.

Murthy, R., & Smith, L. (2005). *Grieving, sharing, and healing: A guide for facilitating early adolescent bereavement groups*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

Online

National Association of School Psychologists, *Crisis resources*: http://nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/index.aspx

A source for multiple handouts including "Helping Children Cope with Loss, Death, and Grief."

National Organization of Victim Assistance: <http://www.trynova.org>

Project LOSS: <http://education.ucsb.edu/jimerson/loss.html>

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