



Grief at School

A Guide
for School
Personnel

Grief at School

Grief is the normal and natural response to loss, a universal human experience. Every year, millions of people are directly affected by a death, and many of them are children and adolescents. Young people also grieve over other important losses as they experience the breakup of families, the loss of friends and relationships, or the sudden absence of security and control in their lives.

School is where we equip children for life, and loss is part of life. For all children, school plays a vital role in understanding what is normal, establishing boundaries, and experiencing community. For a growing number, school fills a void and may assume the importance of family. Educators know that children derive much of their sense of well-being from school.

Every school is a melting pot of complex emotional issues. Students not only react to their own life events, but also reflect the crises in the world around them. Their emotions are contagious. Their young peers want to do the right thing, but are not sure how to do it. Teachers, administrators, school nurses, and counselors feel an enormous burden of responsibility. All the while, life goes on and learning must happen. It's a big job, but help is available.

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Grieving

When Adults Grieve

Understanding your own grief reactions is the first step toward helping students cope. For children and adults, grief is experienced on every level of our being. We know that grief can be responsible for physical symptoms, such as trouble sleeping, changes in appetite, fatigue, or actual illness. Grief affects the way our minds work and becomes the filter through which we see the world and ourselves.

The most obvious effects of grief are on our feelings. Almost all emotions can be part of a grief reaction, and they may be experienced with dizzying speed and

intensity. Fear, anger, relief, despair, peace, guilt, numbness, agitation, and a seemingly bottomless sorrow may all be part of grief. If faith is

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a part of our lives, we may also question how this loss fits with our understanding of our faith.

There is no order or scale by which to measure these emotions. There is no time limit on grief.

While we wade through these feelings, we must also cope with the world outside. We may feel angry that the world doesn't seem to take notice of this awesome event in our lives. It may even bother us when we see others enjoying life.

It hurts when others don't mention the loss, and sometimes it hurts when they do. We may need some time alone to get our bearings or we may wish to regain our identity by resuming our routine. We may plunge into activities that keep us too busy to feel. Our understanding of grief is limited, and each of us—child or adult—is very different. There's no right way to grieve, and no shortcut around grieving.

When Children Grieve

Past assumptions about children's grief may have failed to recognize its intensity.

We now know that children's grief is no less acute than the grief of adults, although its manifestations can be strikingly different. Your students may exhibit many of the reactions already mentioned. Other reactions are specific to their developmental stages and their personal and family histories of loss.

In addition to profound sadness, many children exhibit loneliness and isolation. They may feel abandoned. All children need help in identifying significant people in their lives whom they can talk to or lean on. They will need ongoing help in remembering that they have no control over illness and death—that it's not their fault. Adults have difficulty learning this as well.

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Grieving

In the “me”-centered world of preschool and early primary students, children may feel responsible for the illness or death of a loved one. They may think that by misbehaving or having a “bad thought,” they caused the crisis. Because magical thinking has not yet been replaced with reality, unpleasant events such as death are seen as avoidable or reversible. Children may believe that there is something they can do to make that magic happen—to make the person come back.

From mid-primary years to adolescence, children begin to understand that death is real. They can represent death in pictures and in play, and they may be full of

questions to help fill in this mental image. They hear about abstract concepts, such as heaven, but death still seems remote. It certainly happens with regularity in the media, but children usually don’t consider their own mortality or the death of a family member until they are

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shocked by that reality. Regression to earlier behaviors or misbehavior may reflect their grief. Hyperactivity can signal their wish to escape feelings they cannot yet grasp.

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During the teen years, mature reactions to death as well as skills for surviving loss begin to develop. Abstract concepts and feelings about an afterlife take shape.

Adolescent tendencies to idealize or romanticize make grief feelings even more intense. Teens, as well as younger children, may exhibit physical symptoms; these complaints often reflect a need for nurturing.

In this highly social developmental stage, the grieving teen is particularly vulnerable to peer reactions. Social interaction increases opportunities for support, but it also places the student at risk when emotions are volatile.

Adolescent grief, particularly over the loss of a parent, is often complicated by developmental issues. Teenage individuation may have stretched the parent-child relationship, creating a significant amount of unfinished business when a parent dies. Anger, guilt, and depression are often significantly magnified in adolescent grief.

At any age, grieving is not a weakness; it's a necessity. It is how we heal from our loss and move on. For children, it is part of growing up. Grief may never go away, but it will change. It is experienced and integrated again as children pass from one developmental stage to another, and the loss and its meaning become part of life. The job of parents and educators is to make certain that this new life is healthy and happy.

Your Role as a Teacher or Counselor

Because you are a role model and you influence your students, you have the privilege and the burden of helping them through a very difficult time. When a child is grieving or is seriously ill, and certainly when a child dies, the needs of affected students can be overwhelming. The suggestions offered here will help, but seek additional help if you need it. Other resources are discussed later.

- ❖ Acknowledge your feelings about loss so that you can be emotionally available to help your students.
- ❖ By displaying your emotions, you validate theirs. Don't hide tears.
- ❖ Provide a safe place, literally and figuratively, for the hard work of grief.

Under the stress of a loss, home may not seem stable enough for children to express their fears and pain.

Provide a safe place for the hard work of grief.

Parents frequently put their own mourning aside to “hold on for the kids,” so children may feel they have to hold on too.

Use this opportunity to teach the concept of community.

- ❖ Children have no language and no model for grieving until adults provide them. The words you use and the feelings you express will shape your students' concept of loss and recovery for the rest of their lives. Honest words will serve them better than confusing euphemisms, such as "passed away."
- ❖ Because you are uniquely positioned to be an objective observer, you can be alert for extreme responses that may require professional intervention. These types of responses are discussed later.
- ❖ Use this opportunity to teach the concept of community. Your students will observe and remember how adults care for each other during difficult times. Children want to be taught what they can do.
- ❖ Use other resources in your area; raising children is everybody's business. The hospice in your region is a good place to start. It can provide the information and help you need.
- ❖ Make sure that you take care of yourself. Talk with other professionals about how they deal with children in crisis, and develop your self-care plan.

Helping the Grieving Child

- ❖ At the first opportunity, talk to the parents and the child to ask how you can help. Provide parents with regular feedback.
- ❖ Tell the child, early and often, that you are available to listen and to talk.
- ❖ Acknowledge the child's loss and grief. The worst thing you can say is nothing.
- ❖ Listen carefully. Children may become confused by too much information and by answers to questions they haven't asked.
- ❖ Don't impose your philosophy of death on the child, no matter how comforting you think it may be. Values, traditions, and religious beliefs surrounding death are as diverse as your students. Give them safety and acceptance, not answers.
- ❖ Be prepared to set limits. Children of all ages may become agitated and disoriented when boundaries disappear in times of crisis. Keep up daily routines. A firm hand may be a comforting one, and your consistency can be a sign of normalcy in their off-balance life.

Give them safety and acceptance.

- ❖ A touch can communicate more than words to children who feel confused or isolated. If it's appropriate, ask permission to hug the child.
- ❖ For students of all ages, plan nonverbal activities to allow expressions of grief. Listening to music, creating a dance, drawing pictures, acting out stories, and even collecting stones or leaves are opportunities to talk and remember. Plan physical activities; give opportunities for leadership roles.

Help students brainstorm what they can do to help their grieving friend.

- ❖ Attachment anxieties—fear of letting go of the teacher's hand, of being left on the playground, of not being picked up after school—call for frequently repeated assurances.
- ❖ Peer activities are particularly important for older children. Help students brainstorm what they can do to help their grieving friend. They might collect assignments, run errands, or tutor. Teach them to give the gift of listening.
- ❖ Holidays and anniversaries are especially difficult. Seek additional ways to acknowledge the loss at these times.
- ❖ Observe your other students, as vivid feelings may surface. Open, informal discussion groups can allow unspoken grief from their past to bubble up. Let them know that you are concerned with their feelings as well.

Helping the Grieving Child

When a Child Is Seriously Ill

- ❖ Keep in contact. With parents' permission, regular phone calls to the home or hospital say, "You're still part of the group." Check in with parents regularly rather than asking them to keep in touch.
- ❖ With your students, make a class plan to continue calls, notes, and other age-appropriate gestures of support. These activities lessen the isolation of the child who is ill and reassure the rest of the class. Each child needs to feel connected.
- ❖ Unless the nature of the illness is confidential, get more information from health departments or private associations, or arrange for an expert to talk to the class. Your students feel vulnerable, and they need accurate and honest answers.

When a Child Dies

The death of a child is devastating. Your students will grieve in many different ways, depending on their closeness to the one who died. You need to help them grieve even while you struggle with this loss. Consider these additional steps:

- ❖ Send letters to all parents, informing them of the death. Let them know what the school will be doing and whom they can call for additional help.

- ❖ Call a class meeting. Invite the children to talk about their feelings and make a point of responding respectfully to each one. If the child's death is sudden, accidental, or violent, schedule additional time to talk.
- ❖ Be prepared to supply facts and details. What children imagine is frequently more troubling than reality. Expect curiosity; respond to it with honesty.
- ❖ Bring in help if you need it. Your community hospice program can send a trained grief counselor to meet with you, or can suggest other resources.
- ❖ Make certain that the children know of funeral and memorial arrangements, and that they can attend with their parents' permission.
- ❖ Ask your students how they want to commemorate their friend in a concrete way. They may create a memorial book or bulletin board, collect money for a charitable donation, write notes, or draw pictures for the bereaved family.
- ❖ Invite students to plan a class or school-wide memorial, such as a tree planting or a memory garden. These events reinforce the reality of the death while allowing each child to vent feelings and participate.
- ❖ Revisit these visible reminders throughout the year. It may take some time for children to talk about their feelings.

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There's More Help Available

Whether you're helping grieving children or coping with your own grief, the advice and reassurance of other experienced professionals may help. There is no wrong time and there doesn't need to be a crisis. It may be beneficial just to hear that what's happening is normal.

Perhaps you notice that a student's isolation seems to be deepening, acting out is becoming more pronounced, or you're aware of physical changes. If the

grief emotions seem more extreme than the normal ones discussed here—if they feel unmanageable—additional counseling is recommended.

There's no wrong time to grieve.

Certainly if a child's feelings of profound sadness lead you to worry about that child's safety, you should seek help without delay.

Pay particular attention to:

- ❖ Apathy and withdrawal from family and friends.
- ❖ Indications of alcohol or drug abuse.
- ❖ A significant drop in school performance.
- ❖ Preoccupation with or idealizing violence or death.
- ❖ Unusually good behavior and a relentless need to please.
- ❖ Any verbalization of suicidal thoughts.



Learn the support procedures that your school system already has in place and know how to access them. There are several additional grief resources for your students and their families:

- ❖ The hospice in your area has counselors who are trained in grief. Many hospices have grief programs specifically for children and provide art therapy. Hospices can help you help the children.
- ❖ Community mental health agencies often have counseling available by appointment, or may have walk-in clinics. Religious congregations, hospitals, grief centers, and other nonprofit organizations in your area may offer these services.
- ❖ Many private children’s therapists—counselors, social workers, art or play therapists, psychologists, and psychiatrists—understand the issues of grief. Ask about their experience in this field before making an appointment. Insurance sometimes covers part of the cost.

Hospices can help you help the children.

Teach Loss as Part of Life

Many children in your school deal with grief of one kind or another, often without the knowledge of the faculty. It is an unfortunate fact that others will experience a significant loss before they leave childhood. Seize every opportunity to teach children about life and death. Consider integrating loss and grief concepts into existing curricula:

- ❖ For the youngest children, seasonal changes are an opportunity to introduce the finite nature of life and the reassurance that our world goes on.
- ❖ Allowing children to talk about the death of pets or of relatives teaches acceptance of death as part of life.
- ❖ Comment on death and loss as it occurs in the literature that you use. Reinforce the understanding that loss is universal, that it hurts, and that life goes on—though it is changed.

Seize every opportunity to teach children about life and death.

**Life and death
are sides of the
same coin.**

- ❖ Choose a time when none of your students are grieving to visit a funeral home; invite a funeral director to talk to your class.
- ❖ Encourage discussion of the violent deaths that are so much a part of local and national news. Teach children safe ways to express anger, verbally and nonverbally.
- ❖ Don't forget to joyfully celebrate the arrival of a student's baby brother or sister; life and death are sides of the same coin.
- ❖ Make sure that your school library has books that teach about life and death. Your area hospice can provide a bibliography of books for each age group. American Hospice Foundation's companion publication, *Grief at School Training Guide & Resource Manual*, offers lists of recommended books and videos for various age groups. Helpful information also can be found on the foundation's website at <http://www.americanhospice.org>.

American Hospice Foundation

Grief at School is a publication of the American Hospice Foundation. This national organization serves terminally ill and grieving Americans, voicing their concerns and opening new doors to hospice care.

The American Hospice Foundation offers on-site training programs on grief at school, as well as a variety of publications on grief and hospice care. For further details, contact the foundation at the address below.

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**Each gift helps open new
doors to hospice care.**

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