

Children and Bereavement: How Teachers and Schools Can Help

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Overview of the Bereavement Unit

At the completion of this module, you will have an increased understanding of:

- Why this is an important issue
- How essential teachers are in helping children
- Ways children understand death
- How you can help children cope
- How to teach *all* of your students about death and grieving
- The importance of self-care



Impact of grief on children



Loss is common

- Loss is common in the lives of both younger children and adolescents
- About 5% will face the death of a parent by age 16
- Before adulthood, almost all children will experience the death of an important person in their lives
- It's likely you work with grieving children every day, even if you don't see any children who appear to be grieving

Academics

- Difficulty concentrating
- Distractibility
- Difficulty focusing on assignments and class discussions

Confusion



- What does death mean?
- Why are others acting differently toward me?
- What's expected of me?
- Why do I have these very strong, unfamiliar feelings?

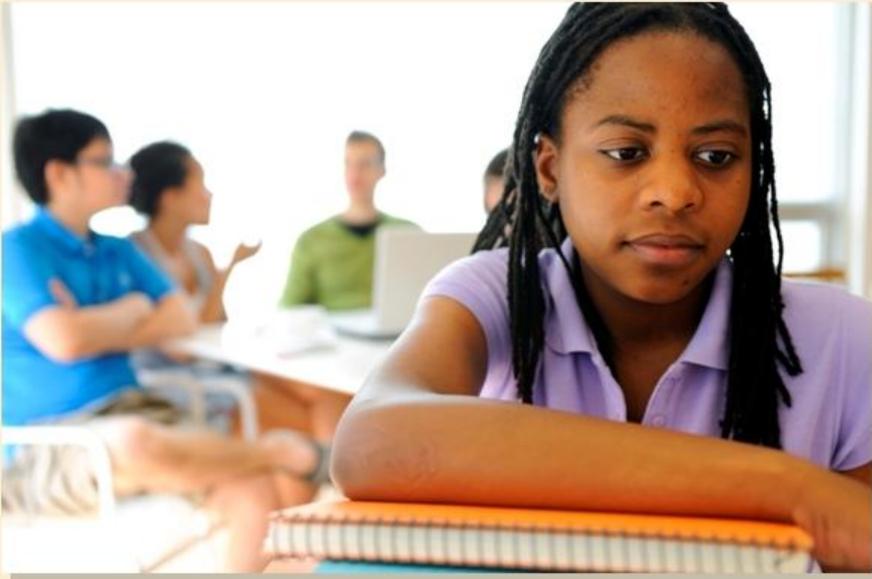
Guilt and shame are common

- In response to their own thoughts and feelings
- About actions taken or not taken
- About the person who died

Other reactions

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Sleep problems
- Anger
- Risky behaviors
- Comments or behaviors that seem cold or selfish
- Acting younger

Other reactions *(continued)*



- Isolation
- Decreased communication
- Pre-existing challenges become worse

Schools are an ideal environment for helping children after a death



Why?



- Students spend a majority of days in school
- Familiar setting
- Supportive environment
- Trained staff
- Support can be offered to large numbers of children

Teachers can do things families can't

- Grieving children need support beyond the family
- Teachers have distance from the loss
- Teachers understand developmental issues
- Teachers are familiar with students' day-to-day behavior
- Teachers should actively engage parents/caregivers

Teachers can:

- Help all students gain understanding and resolve misconceptions
- Provide anticipatory guidance for all students
- Help grieving students now
- Give students a better sense of how to ask for and provide support

Approaches to learning

- Planned coursework
- Teachable moments in class
- Teachable moments with individuals or small groups



These efforts help bereaved students:

- Feel less isolated
- Succeed academically
- Talk with and receive support from peers
- Talk more with their families

These efforts help teachers:

- Identify situations that may need referral
- Connect with students on something of immense importance

How children understand death



Four concepts about death

1. Death is irreversible
2. All life functions end completely at the time of death
3. Everything that is alive eventually dies
4. There are physical reasons someone dies

Death is irreversible

- Children may view death as temporary separation
- Adults may reinforce this belief

Understanding this concept allows children to begin to mourn

All life functions end completely at the time of death

Children may worry that the person who died is

- In pain
- Hungry or thirsty
- Afraid
- Sad
- Lonely

Understanding this concept helps children understand that the person who died is not suffering

Everything that is alive eventually dies

- Children may believe they and their loved ones will never die
- They may be confused about why this death occurred
- Misunderstanding leads to guilt and shame

Understanding this concept makes it less likely that children will associate death with guilt and shame

There are physical reasons someone dies.

- If children don't understand the real reason a person died, they are more likely to create explanations that cause guilt or shame
- Adults can help children understand the physical cause of death:
 - ~ Use brief, simple language
 - ~ Avoid graphic details

Understanding this concept helps children minimize feelings of guilt and shame

Common problems in explaining death to children

- Less direct terms can be confusing
- Religious beliefs are abstract



Teachers may avoid discussions of death

- Taboo subject
- Uncomfortable with topic
- Concern about saying “the wrong thing”

Factors that affect bereavement

- Age
- Personality
- Coping skills
- History of prior difficulties



Factors that affect bereavement

(continued)

- Support from family, friends, school, community
- Type of death
- Relationship with person who died

Death and secondary loss

- Changed relationships
- Move after a death
- Change in lifestyle
- Change in peer group



Death and secondary loss

(continued)

- Loss of shared memories
- Change in plans for the future
- Decreased sense of security and safety

Identifying distress in children



Teachers and parents are likely to *underestimate* children's reaction to death and need for support

- Adults may expect that children will not feel or respond to a death in deep way
- Children may not communicate a sense of grief in their *behaviors*
- Children may not communicate a sense of grief in their *words*
- Adults *want* children to be OK and tend to see them that way
- Children protect adults

Cumulative loss

- Children who experience high rates of violence also have a need to talk about a death
- Children do *not* “get used to it”
- They become *more*, not less, sensitized

When to make referrals to outside services

- Continued school problems
- Aggression or other severe problem behaviors
- Excessive guilt
- Apathy or depression

When to make referrals to outside services

(continued)



- Social withdrawal and isolation
- Self-destructive behaviors
- Suicidal talk or behaviors

Providing support to grieving children



Being with grieving children



- Be present and authentic
- Listen more, talk less
- Avoid trying to “cheer up” students

Being with grieving children

(continued)

- Allow emotional expression
- Show empathy
- Stop harmful or dangerous behaviors

What *not* to say

- “I know just what you’re going through.”

Instead:

- “I can only imagine how difficult this must be for you.”

What *not* to say *(continued)*

- “You must be incredibly angry.”

Instead:

- “Most people have strong feelings when something like this happens to them. What has this been like for you?”

What *not* to say *(continued)*

- “It’s important to remember the good things in life as well.”

Instead:

- “What kinds of memories do you have about the person who died?”

What *not* to say *(continued)*

- “Both my parents died when I was your age.”

Instead:

- “Tell me more about what this has been like for you.”

What *not* to say *(continued)*

- “You’ll need to be strong now for your family. It’s important to get a grip on your feelings.”

Instead:

- “How is your family doing? What kinds of concerns do you have about them?”

What *not* to say *(continued)*

- “My dog died last week. I know how you must be feeling.”

Instead:

- “I know how I’ve felt when someone I loved died, but I don’t really know how you’re feeling. Can you tell me something about what this has been like for you?”

Challenges in talking to students

Students may:

- Feel overwhelmed
- Not know what kind of support would be helpful
- Not want to stand out from their peers
- Be more comfortable turning to peers

Respond to challenges

- Initiate conversation
- Start simply
- Ask open-ended questions
- Offer a private conversation
- Arrange connections to an adult the child can speak to

What to say: getting students to talk

- Students feel permission to talk about their loss
- Students feel teacher is genuinely listening
- Teachers have already discussed death, grief, other difficult topics



What to say: invite the conversation

- Express concern: “I was thinking about you.”
- Invite the conversation: “How are you doing?”
- Listen and observe
- Offer reassurance

Grief changes over time

- Intense feelings occur less frequently
- Death of a loved one stays with us throughout our lives
- Especially true for children

Common times children re-experience loss

- Holidays
- Transitions to a new grade or school
- Special events, awards ceremonies, graduations
- Rites of passage

Grief triggers

- Common for both children and adults
- Cause sudden and powerful feelings of sadness
- Examples:
 - ~ Anniversaries, birthdays, holidays
 - ~ Listening to a song
 - ~ A difficult assignment the deceased might have helped with

Helpful responses for triggers

- Provide a safe space or adult the child can talk to
- Set procedures for the child to obtain support
- Let the child call a parent or family member if needed
- Provide permission and encouragement to see school nurse or counselor
- Offer private time with teacher to talk about feelings

Teachable moments

- Death can come up frequently in the classroom
 - ~ Books and readings
 - ~ History
 - ~ Current events
 - ~ Health lessons
- Teachers can't know how students will be affected
- Be sensitive as a matter of course

Activities that focus on a loved one



- Cards, gifts, letters, essays
- Keep activities more open
- Invite students to focus on the specific family member, or someone else important in their lives

Discussing topics involving death

- Novels, short stories, current events
- Prepare students ahead of time for content that might be distressing
- Offer to talk privately to any students who have concerns or feelings in response to the assignment or discussion

Teaching about important national events

- Terrorist attacks, wars, natural disasters
- Bereaved students may have strong emotional responses
- Especially true when students or families have been directly affected

Special circumstances

- When an entire school is affected by a death
- Seriously ill students
- Memorials and commemorations

When an entire school is affected by a death

- Establish system to notify teachers and students
- Have strategy for offering support to students *and* staff
- This planning is the work of a school crisis team

Seriously ill students

- Teachers are likely to have students with serious conditions in their classrooms
- It's important for schools and teachers to understand:
 - ~ How to best support these children
 - ~ How to provide information to other students and families

Memorials, commemorations and interventions after a suicide

- Schools will want to set up procedures to guide memorials and commemoration activities
- It's critical that students play active role in planning, so activities are meaningful and developmentally appropriate
- In some instances, such as a suicide or violent death, appropriate interventions can help students stay safe

Guidance about funerals

- Families may look to teachers for advice about children's participation in funerals
- A teacher may be the first professional who can help facilitate this
- Children usually benefit by attending funerals

Guidance about funerals

(continued)

- Explain what will happen
- Answer questions
- Invite children to participate at the level they desire
- Do not force or coerce

Guidance about funerals

(continued)

- Find an adult to be with each child
- Allow options
- Offer a role in the service

Take care of yourself



Steps to self-care

- Talk with people you trust
- Practice stress management
- Give support to others
- Stay connected

Personal benefits of supporting grieving students

- Increased meaning in work
- Enrichment in personal life
- Deeper understanding



Thank you for your commitment

Thank you for all you do in helping students throughout their education



For more information

- The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement:
www.cincinnatichildrens.org/school-crisis
- The U.S. Department of Education Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center: www.rems.ed.gov
- Schonfeld, D., and M. Quackenbush. *The Grieving Student: A Teacher's Guide*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing, 2010.

www.nylgriefguide.com

After a Loved One Dies— How Children Grieve

And how parents and other
adults can support them



What's Covered in this Guide

- Helping children, helping the family
 - Why a parent's role is important
 - Helping children understand death
 - How children respond to death
 - Attending funerals and memorials
- Helping children cope over time
 - Getting help
 - Taking care of yourself
 - Looking to the future

Schonfeld, D., and M. Quackenbush. *After a Loved One Dies—How Children Grieve and How Parents and Other Adults Can Support Them*. New York, NY: New York Life Foundation, 2009.

Resources for additional information

- For all topics:
Schonfeld, D., and M. Quackenbush. *The Grieving Student: A Teacher's Guide*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing, 2010.
- For practical suggestions on responding to the death of a student or staff member:
<http://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/svc/alpha/s/school-crisis/guidelines-bereavement.htm>
- A resource on how to create and train school crisis teams:
Schonfeld, D., R. Lichtenstein, M. K. Pruett and D. Speese-Linehan. *How to Prepare for and Respond to a Crisis*. 2nd ed. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2002.