



**NATIONAL  
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SCHOOL  
PSYCHOLOGISTS**

# 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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## FOR STUDENTS ATTENDING FUNERALS

Students benefit from preparation when attending a funeral or memorial service. After giving them the basic information about the service arrangements, lead a compassionate discussion on the following:

### Reasons we have funerals or memorial gatherings include:

- Having an opportunity to say good-bye.
- Funerals/memorial services are our way of marking the passing of a human life.
- This is a social or public grief process that provides an opportunity to pay tribute, to share memories, to hear new things about their loved one's life.
- A part of the grief process is a spiritual dimension, which is included in these gatherings.
- A time for group support of all who are sharing in this loss, to support each other.
- The service helps bring a sense of closure and is the ending of the "formal" period of grieving. Stress that individual's grief isn't over, but that this is a turning point back toward usual activities.

### Also help them prepare for:

- What the facility might be like -- whether a church or funeral home, how the space might be decorated, what the seating will be like
- Who is likely to be there -- whether they will see family members of the deceased, what that's like
- Who will officiate, the "order of things" one might expect during the service
- Whether the casket will be present at the service, whether it will be open, or whether viewing will or won't be happening elsewhere in the building.
- That they should decide whether to attend viewings based on their own desires and not to satisfy others; is OK to touch the body, and that it will be cold.
- That it is OK to leave the service quietly if they become too uncomfortable during the service. Also, let them know that many people feel somewhat uncomfortable during funerals. Some people may feel a bit of panic, anxiety, fear or acute sadness, which is not unusual... That although it *feels* dangerous, grief -- especially the first time - is just very uncomfortable and, for many, unfamiliar.
- There are a variety of means to express condolences to family, including sending cards and flowers, stopping by the house, writing or sharing their favorite memories or appreciations of their deceased friend, taking food, offering errands.
- It often feels awkward the first few times you talk with someone who is in profound grief, but usually families appreciate genuine attempts to express sympathy. Give students some guidelines and ideas for talking with profoundly bereaved:
  - Platitudes and explanations are usually not helpful (such as, "It was God's will," "At least he didn't feel any pain," or "he's in a better place.")
  - Helpful openers include:
    - "This is just so sad for all of us."
    - "This must be so difficult."
    - "I wish I knew something to say or do that could make you feel better."
    - "I don't know what to say, but I came because I care."
    - "I'll miss him so much."
    - "We're thinking about you and are concerned about how you're doing."
    - And best of all, encourage them to share their favorite memories.

Be sure students know what they must do in order to be released from school to attend the service. The school may make a standard slip which students bring back, signed by parents. Consider opening the Safe Room following the funeral for those who need some time for decompression before returning to classes. Some students may have maintained denial until attending the service and may struggle more after the service than prior.



You might wrap up with, "What would help you feel safe now? At home? What about when school starts? What will you want your principal and teachers to know? What else?" And finally, "How will I know if this is bothering you later?" This is when you let them know that you want them to keep you posted on this... and it is always best if what you can do is check in with them in a few days. "I've been thinking about our conversation a few days ago and wonder what kinds of thoughts you've had since then." Always let youth know that you appreciate their letting you know whatever it is they've shared. "I'm so glad you told me that. I just can't guess what is on your mind, so I'm so glad you let me know!"