

What Teachers and School Personnel Can Do To Help Grieving Students

Children are usually completely unprepared for the grief that they experience when a loved one dies. Often their adult family members and friends have their "hands full" with their own grief and do not realize that the children need understanding and comforting, too. Teachers may find it difficult to help a grieving student. Classmates don't know what to say or do. This leaves the bereaved child to struggle with the unknown, painful feelings of grief by him/herself. It is difficult for adults to express their grief. Children are usually even more limited than adults in expressing themselves. When a classmate dies, the entire student body may be affected in varying degrees. Since a student spends six or more hours in school each day, it is critical that their "school family" learn ways of reaching out and helping their bereaved student/classmate. To ignore or minimize their grief is to deny the child a much needed avenue for understanding and help. Our focus in this article will be on grief due to death, but the suggestions will apply to any grief - separation, divorce, moving, breakup of a friendship, unemployment, etc.

Grow In Your Understanding:

In order to be helpful to bereaved students, it is important that teachers/school personnel understand what it is like to be bereaved and ways of coping.

- Look honestly at your own feelings about death and grief. Do you ignore, suppress or acknowledge them?
- Read some of the many helpful books on bereavement and helping a child through grief.
- Attend workshops on grief; sponsor an in-service day on grief.

Grief Is A Part Of Life:

Take advantage of the many teachable moments to discuss death and grief before it occurs. Children should be taught that death and grief are a part of life, just as being born, sleeping, eating, etc.

- Develop special units on death and grief.
- Watch for earlier mourning experiences, e.g., death of a pet.
- Tell/read stories in class that will increase the students' awareness of death and grief.
- Use basic words - "die" and "dead". Avoid phrases such as "passed away," "gone to sleep," "on a trip" and "someone lost a relative". "Lost" implies hope for return.

What Can I Do To Help?

Teachers: Be aware that the bereaved student may experience:

- Shock, crying, denial, anger, guilt, fear, withdrawal, depression, aggressiveness, anxiety, panic, regression and physical complaints.
- Shortened attention span.
- Behavior problems and problems with school work.
- Repressed feelings that come out in other ways or at a much later time.

It is important to:

- Interact with the bereaved student instead of avoiding him/her.
- Use the name of the person who died.
- Be patient, understanding and accepting of the student's feelings.
- Nurture a student's self-esteem.
- Encourage students to express their grief in a healthy way.
- Provide a place for the student to go if they need to be alone.
- Realize that grief may take a long time - even years!
- Be aware that students grieve not only for parents, siblings and friends, but also a favorite uncle, grandparents, pets.
- Be responsive to a child's questions. Let answers be honest, simple and direct. If you don't understand something, let the student know that, too.
- Grief hurts desperately even when it's not expressed. Help the bereaved student and classmates to realize that grief is a normal and natural reaction to loss.
- If a student seeks you out to talk, take the time to really listen. Gently encourage the student to talk, but don't force conversation. Please don't change the subject - allow some expression of grief.
- Realize that some bereaved students may be suicidal. They need people to listen to them, to care about them, believe them and get them help.
- It is okay to cry, be sad or angry. Express your grief. In fact, it models to the student that it is okay to feel this way.
- If appropriate and allowed, put a hand on their shoulder or arm. A hug, when you know the student well, is even better.
- It helps if the whole class shares their classmate's grief. (Caution: some children are uncomfortable being singled out.) The class learns about grief and the bereaved student doesn't feel so alone.
- If possible, meet with a few of the bereaved student's friends to help them cope and to suggest ways that they may be of support to their friend.
- Form a peer group within the school.
- Have grief resources well marked in the school library. Even highlight these resources in a book display occasionally.
- Stay in touch with the parents.

Children's Comprehension:

Listed below are some guidelines as to children's comprehension. These stages may overlap due to a variety of factors and are given as a loose framework. Children understand at their own stage of development.

- Children up to age four have little understanding of the meaning of death.

- Between the ages of four and seven death is seen as temporary or reversible. A child has a feeling for loss but has difficulty in grasping the concept of death.
- Some children five to ten view death as irreversible, yet perceive the deceased as retaining certain biological functions.
- Other children six and over view death as permanent.
- A child of eleven to twelve has a deep feeling of loss and knows what death is.
- Adolescents fourteen to sixteen, according to clinical studies, may have more intense grief than any other age group, although they may refrain from expressing it.

School Administration:

At the time of death:

- Set up procedures for coping with the death immediately, for the next few days, and as needed.
- Hold a special faculty meeting so that information regarding the death and plans for helping the students may be discussed.
- Tell facts to discourage rumors.
- Encourage teachers - especially homeroom teachers or a teacher who is best able - to share the facts of the death with the class.
- Encourage classroom discussion.
- Have trained people available to listen to students and teachers.
- Encourage poems, letters, drawings, essays about death/grief.
- Hold a voluntary assembly. Be understanding.
- Do something to acknowledge the death, e.g., plant a tree.
- Consider a procedure for student participation in funeral and related events. This is done on a voluntary basis in cooperation with family and school personnel.

What Do I Say?

All that is necessary is a squeeze of the hand, a hug, your "being there". If you want to say something, say "I'm sorry" or "I wish that I could take your pain away." It is not helpful to say: "I know just how you feel. You must be over it by now. Don't cry, you'll upset your . . . Be brave for your family. I know someone who had two family members die (don't minimize their loss). It was God's will. He/she lived a good life. He/she is out of pain. Now you're the man or woman of the house. Boy's don't cry."

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