



Tips for Teachers: Helping a Grieving Student at School

Children and Grief

When a student in your classroom experiences the death of someone close to them - such as a close family member or friend - it may be helpful to consider the following issues. While death and grief can be challenging topics for anyone to face, as a teacher, your ability to process your own feelings about loss and to be a support to the grieving student – and to your entire classroom – can help to facilitate the process for all concerned.

Remember that grief is unique. No two individuals grieve in the same manner. Age, developmental capacity, family system, cultural background, past loss history, and personal coping style may all impact the grief response of a student. Some may be quiet and reserved, while others may be more outspoken and angry. Others may vacillate between these two extremes.

Use the words “death,” “dying,” and “dead” rather than euphemisms such as “passed away,” “lost” or “sleeping.” Euphemisms can be confusing for a grieving student. Using the words “dead,” “death,” and “dying” in a sensitive and compassionate manner helps to communicate to the student that we acknowledge the death, that we care about them, and that we are comfortable addressing this issue in a direct, yet understanding way.

If possible, reach out to the grieving student and his/her family before the student returns to school. As a demonstration of support, it may be helpful to reach out to the family with a phone call, a condolence card and/or, if appropriate, a short home visit to express your condolences and concern. This may help the student to re-acclimate when he/she returns to school after the death.

If possible, attend the viewing, funeral or memorial service for the family member or send a condolence card to the family. A personal show of support can send an important message to the student and his/her family that there is a clear acknowledgment of the death and the resultant changes that may come with it.

It is best to avoid clichés. While well meant, promptings such as “Don’t cry,” “You need to be strong,” “Your mother/father wouldn’t want you to be upset,” “You are the man/woman of the house now,” “Don’t worry ... things will get better” often can actually deprive students of an important part of their grieving process. It may be better to offer condolences of: “I’m so very sorry that your mother/father/sister has died. I am a good listener and am here if you ever would like to talk,” or “I cannot imagine how difficult this must be for you right now. I am a good listener and am around if you ever want to talk,” or “I’m keeping you and your family in my thoughts as you all go through this difficult time.”

Provide the grieving student’s class and/or friends with an opportunity to demonstrate support by sending condolence cards or personal drawings or writings that they may wish to share with the grieving student and his/her family. (It is vital to review these items before sending them to the grieving student or family to ensure that content is appropriate.)

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If possible, speak to the grieving student's class about grief and loss and what that looks and feels like. Ask the class what experiences they may have had with loss in general, what it was like, how they handled it. Discuss what the grieving student might be feeling and how the class might be supportive.

Suggest that students ask the grieving student what he/she might want or need upon his/her return to school. Grieving students may feel like so much is out of their control; having friends ask them what they would like or how they wish to be treated can feel both supportive and empowering to grieving students.

Let the grieving student decide how his/her return to school is handled. It is important to allow the grieving student the opportunity to decide how he/she would like to manage his/her return to school after the death. Some students wish to tell their classmates about the death themselves; others would rather that the teacher take on this responsibility. Some may only wish to hear "Welcome back." Still others may prefer that nothing specific be said about the death at all. Ask the student and keep in communication with him/her. As well, the grieving student may not wish to address the death immediately upon return to school, however, he/she may wish to address it at another time in the future. Many grieving students report that – while they wish the death to be acknowledged in some way (either privately or more formally in the classroom), they also do not wish to bring undue attention to themselves.

Keep expectations of grieving students reasonable. Grieving students may have real difficulty with focus and concentration, recall of information, and memorization. They may also forget things very easily or sometimes "dissociate" while in class. These are all customary responses after a significant loss and they may very well impact academic progress and achievement.

If possible, devise a separate lesson schedule for the grieving student. Some students may need an alternative lesson plan or adjusted lessons for a while. They may also need extra time to complete and submit assignments. Keep in close communication with the grieving student and his/her family so that there are no "surprises" either for you or for the student around these issues.

If possible, request that another student be a "study buddy" for the grieving student. Especially in the younger grades, this may be an effective intervention to help grieving students. Check things out first - both with the grieving student and with the "study buddy" - to see if they are both open to this. The "study buddy" should be a student who is him/herself maintaining themselves academically and who also would have the capacity to assume this level of commitment to the grieving student (i.e., meeting with the student, sharing notes, helping with homework, etc.).

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Maintain boundaries. Although a level of sensitivity and compassion can be helpful for grieving students, it is important to maintain normal, daily boundaries and to allow the consequences for violating those boundaries. Knowing what the boundaries are and what the consequences for crossing them are can actually be stabilizing for grieving students.

Balance routine with exceptions. While potentially challenging to do, maintaining some semblance of a balance between routine and exceptions can be helpful to grieving students. In fact, some grieving students wish to return to school relatively soon after the death of a loved one, as the routine and structure of the school environment can provide a sense of safety, security as well as a comforting experience of “knowing what to expect next.” This can be extremely helpful to a grieving child who may feel that many, many things are out of their control.

Keep in communication with the student. This will help you to assess the student’s needs and will let him/her know that you care. Consistent, open communication will help to prevent confusion and misunderstanding. Such communication may often be necessary for months after the death.

Keep in communication with the family. This will let the family know that you possess an authentic concern for the student and will also allow them to have an insight into how he/she is faring within the school environment and it will allow you, as the teacher, to have insight into how the student is faring outside of school. Again, such communication may often be necessary for months after the death

Collaborate with the guidance counselor, school social worker and/or an appropriate administrator to allow the student to unobtrusively leave class and visit them if their grief may become overwhelming. Oftentimes for a grieving student simply knowing that this is a possibility can alleviate the need to leave a classroom. (Additionally, it is rare that grieving students will “use” this as an excuse to avoid tests, examinations or other academic responsibilities, especially if communication between and among teachers, students, administrators, and parents/care-providers has been well-maintained.)

Remember that grief sometimes may express itself somatically for children. Sometimes grieving children express that they are experiencing stomach aches, headaches, shortness of breath, tightness in the chest, accelerated heartbeat or other physical manifestations. It is important to acknowledge this, to make referrals to the appropriate medical personnel (school nurse) and to inform the student’s family that you are noticing these experiences. If physical causes are ruled out, these may be somatic expressions of grief. Because children do not have the full cognitive or emotional capacity to express themselves their emotions may be somaticized.

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Be aware of important dates and occasions that may be triggering for grieving students. Anniversary dates of the person's death, family birthdays, as well as important "rites of passage" such as graduations, weddings, holidays, and religious celebrations may carry with them either memories of the deceased person and/or they may emphasize the absence of the deceased person. Special acknowledgment of the difficulty of these times can convey a genuine caring for the student – even months or years after the death has occurred.

If possible, integrate grief and loss issues into your curriculum. Since grief and loss are universal topics, it can be helpful to address them in the course of the normal academic cycle. Life Science or Biology usually addresses the life cycle; Social Studies can address the impact of death historically and culturally; English classes may address how various authors have approached the topic; and Foreign Language classes may address the various rituals that accompany death and loss and how grief may be expressed or experienced by various cultures. Integrating death, loss and grief naturally into the curriculum may make it easier to address when there is a student in your class who is grieving.

Remember that grief is a life-long process. A grieving student may not be back to his/her "normal" self within the course of weeks or even months. While it does change over time, grief is a life-long process ... and it takes time to heal.

Refer the student for further assistance if he/she displays or reports excessive difficulty with social, academic, emotional or family functioning. In the case where a student may express deep depression, overwhelming panic or anxiety, extreme difficulty focusing or concentrating, a strong desire to "be with the (deceased) person" or suicidal ideations, it is crucial to refer him/her to the appropriate school personnel (guidance counselor, social worker and/or administrator) for assessment and possible intervention/treatment.