

Grief in Children

Children grieve differently than adults. Developmentally children may not have the language or cognitive skills to understand and communicate how they feel. It is not uncommon for children to regress emotionally, academically, and socially during the grieving process. Their moods may seem erratic and their behavior confusing. The following are some suggestions for helping a child navigate the confusion of loss and the grief that follows.

Maintain Structure

Structure and consistency can be very comforting to children, especially following a loss.

- Keep rules and boundaries in place even during grief.
- Use schedules and set aside time for schoolwork, play, quiet time, exercise, etc. day.
- When a new situation arises or something needs to change, prepare the child in advance.

Acknowledge Their Loss

Acting like nothing happened or avoiding talk about the loss can make the child feel frightened or ashamed. It is important to acknowledge the child's feelings and allow them to talk as much or as little as they want. Share your feelings as appropriate for the developmental age of the child. Sharing your feelings helps to model how to talk about feelings and helps the child see that emotions are normal and okay.

Encourage Questions

Answer the child's questions as openly and honestly as appropriate for their age. Periodically ask the child if they have any questions or worries about the loss. This will open the door for the child to express their fears and begin to articulate their thinking about the loss. Correct any misconceptions the child may have about the loss such as fears that they in some way caused the loss.

Be Honest

It is important to be as honest with the child as appropriate for their age and understanding. For example children do not need all of the details of a divorce, but it is important to be clear about the facts that relate to the child, such as visitations. It's also important to use clear language to lessen confusion. For example, following the death of a loved one, use the word death. Phrases like passed away or no longer with us may be confusing to a child.

Help the Child Understand Their Feelings

In order to understand and manage their grief, children need to identify, accept, and express their feelings. Help the child develop an emotional vocabulary for naming their feelings. Read books or watch movies with young characters who face loss to allow the child to compare how they feel to how the character felt. Help children express themselves through journal writing, drawing, painting, coloring, music, making a scrapbook, dance, or other activities.

Seek Support

Some children have a harder time than others coping with grief and may need additional support. If you notice that the child shows signs of anxiety, depression, or other unhealthy coping strategies, talk to mental health care professional. Some signs that your child may need additional support include:

- changes in academic performance or attendance,
- social isolation,
- self-harm or suicidal ideation,
- aggressive or noncompliance, or
- other behavioral challenges such as insomnia, bedwetting, new or heightened fear

Grief in Teens

With bodies changing, hormones raging, relationships shifting, and independence growing, the teen years are often confusing and challenging, even without the added stress of loss. These changes can make it difficult to know how to help a teen process their grief. Teens may be more inclined to hide their feelings and experience shame, guilt, or confusion. Their emotions may shift erratically, swinging from needing the comfort and guidance of an adult to wanting independence to 'deal' with the loss on their own. Often teens turn to peers for support and will express a lack trust in adults, feeling that adults don't understand. The following are strategies to help a teen navigate the confusion of a loss and the grief that follows.

Acknowledge Their Loss

Following a loss, teens need time to feel their emotions and embrace their grief. Some activities that may help a teen embrace their grief include:

- listening to music that helps them express how they are feeling,
- looking at photos or videos,
- reading a book or watching a movie about a character that experiences grief,
- paying tribute to the person they lost by creating a video, collage, memory book, or social media post, or
- journaling, drawing, dancing, painting, or writing music or poetry to express their feelings about the loss.

Encourage Connections

Often teens feel disconnected after a loss. They might feel like nobody understands what they are going through. It's important to help students find others who they can connect with – people who will encourage them to share their story, people who respect their privacy while remaining close enough to show empathy, people who can listen and accept the emotions they are feeling in the moment. These connections may happen with family members, peers, or school or community support.

Utilize Peer Support

Because often teens are more comfortable talking to peers than adults, help them find a teen support group or peer counseling. Listening to and talking with other teens who have experienced loss can be helpful for many teens.

Seek Support

Some teens may have a harder time coping with grief and may need additional support. If you notice that the child shows signs of anxiety, depression, or other unhealthy coping strategies, talk to mental health care professional. Some signs that your child may need additional support include:

- changes in academic performance or attendance,
- social isolation,
- self-harm or suicidal ideation,
- aggressive or noncompliance, or
- other behavioral challenges such as insomnia, substance use, acting out sexually, or engaging risky or dangerous activities.

Supporting Grief Following a Death

While all loss can cause some degree of grief, the death of a family member, friend, fellow student, or significant adult such as a coach, teacher, or other mentor, often causes significant grief. And in the case of the death of a student or staff member on campus, grief can impact the entire school community. The following are suggestions for ways to help students and staff grieve the loss of a member or members of the school community.

Supporting the School Community

- In the case of a death of a member of the school community, write a letter stating the appropriate facts of the death, including any information the family of the deceased would like to convey such as any needs they have or funeral arrangements. Show the letter to the immediate family of the deceased, to verify the facts and make sure they are comfortable with any information being shared on a school level. This letter should be provided to teachers to read and talk about with their students, as well as sent to parents and caregivers.
- In the case of a death of a family member or friend of a student, consult the student and/or the student's family as to who should be informed. It is typically important that all adult staff on campus are aware of the loss and often it is helpful to share the information with the student's classmates.
- Especially in the case of a death of a member of the school community, arrange for additional grief counselors to be available on campus the day of the announcement. Assess the need for grief counselors for the days following, including the day that funeral services are held. Provide teachers, staff, students, parents, and caregivers with a list of grief counselors and other resources who can be contacted if needed.
- If the teachers and staff are also dealing with their own grief from the loss, allow time for them to meet together to talk and support each other and/or meet with a grief counselor. It's okay for adults to share their own emotions with students following a loss, but it's also important that they are able to share their strength.
- Consider organizing a tribute to help staff and students process their grief. Tributes may include creating a mural, video, or memory book; planting a tree or other plant; displaying a plaque; etc. in remembrance of the person's life.
- Anticipate grief triggers such as birthdays, anniversaries, or activities that were loved or experienced with the person for students and staff. Determine strategies for managing the emotions such as having a place in the school where teachers and students can go when they need some time by themselves or a procedure for scheduling time to talk with the school counselor or a grief counselor.
- In the case of the death of a student, the empty desk may cause a trigger. There is no one right answer about what to do with the desk. Some may feel that leaving the desk empty is a constant reminder. Others may feel that removing the desk is a sign that the memory of the student is being removed. Discuss as a class what to do with the desk.
- Teachers and staff should not take on the role of a grief counselor for students or their families, but rather understand the grieving process and ways to provide support.

- Grieving will take time, but it is important to be aware of signs that grief is overwhelming any person in the school community. If you notice that adults or students are showing signs of anxiety, depression, or other unhealthy coping strategies, talk to mental health care professional. Some signs that a person may need additional support include:
 - changes in academic or job performance or attendance,
 - social isolation,
 - self-harm or suicidal ideation,
 - aggressive or noncompliance, or
 - other behavioral challenges such as insomnia, substance use, or engaging risky or dangerous activities.

Supporting Younger Students

- Use words like dead and died when talking with students. It is important to help young children understand the realities of death, such as death is final and everyone dies, and assure them that they are not to blame.
- Give students the opportunity to talk about their loss without interruption or talking about your own losses. Some students may prefer to write or draw pictures to express their feelings. Other students may want to express their grief in physical ways such as running, dancing, or playing outside.
- Understand that a grieving student may have trouble concentrating. Consider adapting their schedule and assignments, as necessary. Keep in touch with their parents/caregivers and other teachers, regarding any accommodations you are making to coordinate efforts to support the child's emotional, social, and academic needs.
- It is common for young students to regress following the death of someone they love. Avoid criticizing the student's behavior and focus on showing support for the child's grieving process. That is not to say that students shouldn't follow the school or classroom rules. Consistency is important for grieving students. Rules should be followed, but immature behavior may be overlooked.
- Read picture books that talk about death to the students. It's helpful for students to see how the character responds to death.

Supporting Older Students

- Encourage (but don't force) students to talk. Let them know that they can talk with you when they are ready or help them identify other adults they can talk with such as the school counselor or a grief counselor. Some students may feel more comfortable expressing their feelings by writing, drawing, listening to music, writing music, exercising, etc.
- Talking about the death does not upset students. It is the loss experienced by the death that upsets them. Often adults think that it's best not to bring up the subject of death or ask how the student is doing following, for fear of causing additional grief. It is important to express empathy and support to help the student process their emotions.
- When talking with students, don't try to lessen their pain by trying to cheer them up. Instead, allow students to express their pain and show empathy.
- Some students may feel that they have done something that caused the death or that they could have done something to prevent the death. Help the student understand that they are not responsible for the death.
- Involve the students, especially those who are closest to the person, in determining what type of tribute may be most important or in participating in decisions about how to remember the person.