

Dealing with Grieving Students

- **The school classroom is often a child's second "family".** As a teacher, you have the opportunity to touch children's lives in a very special way. When a death influences the lives of your students, you, along with your school, can make a life-long difference by creating an environment for healing and support.
- **Talk with bereaved students and their parents before the return to school.** If possible, call or meet with families, as this lets them know you are thinking of them and that the school is supportive. Ask what they would like the class to know about the death, funeral arrangements, etc. This is an important step in stalling the "rumour mill" that can be harmful and extremely frustrating for families.
- **Talk to your class about grief and encourage them to share how they feel.** Discuss what experience the students in your class have with bereavement or loss, and how they coped. School counsellors and social workers who can do a presentation or aid in discussion are valuable assets for bereaved students.
- **Discuss how difficult it may be for their classmate to return to school, and how they may be of help.** Ask your class how they would like to be treated if they were returning to school after a death, pointing out differences in preferences. Some students prefer to be left alone; others want the death to be discussed freely. Most grieving students want everyone to treat them the same way as before. As a rule, they don't like people being extra nice, putting them in the spotlight or acting like nothing happened.
- **Visit the funeral home** or attend the funeral and sign the guest book so that the student will know you were there.

- **Provide a way for your class to reach out to a grieving student and their family.** Sending cards or pictures to the child and family shows that the class is thinking of them. If students knew the person who died, they could share memories of that person.
- **Provide flexibility and support to grieving students upon their return to class.** Recognize that students may have difficulty focusing on schoolwork. Be open to making allowances if quiet, alone time or assignment extensions are required. However, it is also important to maintain the usual routines and limits for behavior and academics, as this provides a safe, secure and comforting environment.
- **Provide assistance to grieving students who are floundering academically.** Help to arrange for a tutor if you are not able to provide the time yourself. Be prepared to let students talk, not only about academic problems but also about their feelings concerning the death.
- **Inform students that school counsellors or social workers are available.** It is important that students have someone who is willing to listen. If you are a counsellor or social worker, be knowledgeable about available resources in the community and inform students and parents.
- **The school community as a whole should acknowledge the grief of all students and staff.** This may be done by holding a memorial assembly, building a memorial wall, planting a tree, installing a bench or creating a memorial garden, to name a few. It is important to support students if a death occurs outside the school year as well. If a school ceremony is not possible at this time, some form of acknowledgement is recommended when students return to class.

How Teachers Can Help

Do listen. Grieving students need a safe, trusted adult who will listen to them. Do follow routines. Routines provide a sense of safety, which is very comforting. Do set limits; just because students are grieving doesn't mean that the rules do not apply. Setting clear limits provides a more secure and hence safer environment. Do not suggest that the student has grieved long enough. Do not indicate that the student should get over it and move on. Do not act as if nothing has happened. Do not say things like: "It could be worse. You still have a brother."; "I know how you feel."; "You'll be stronger because of this." Do not expect the student to complete all assignments on a timely basis.

Basic Principles of Teen Grief

1. Grieving is the teen's natural reaction to a death. Helping teens accept the reality that they are griever allows them to do their grief work and to progress in their grief journey.
2. Each teen's grief is unique. Grief is best understood as a process in which bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts, and behaviours surface in response to the death, its circumstances, past relationship and the realization of the future without the person.
3. There are no "right" or "wrong" ways to grieve. Coping with a death does not follow a simple pattern or set of rules, nor is it a course to be evaluated or graded.
4. Grief is ongoing. Grief is not a disease that can be cured, but a process we learn to work through on the journey to acceptance of the loss.

Possible Grief Reactions

Grief can manifest in several ways, including:

- anxiety
- withdrawal
- acting out
- tears
- panic
- open distress
- fear
- aggression
- guilt
- anger
- regression
- rebellion
- denial
- lack of affect
- depression
- suicidal thoughts
- stoical bravery
- short attention span
- nightmares
- nervous giggling
- difficulty with concentration / memory
- becoming the class clown
- changes in school performance
- sleep and appetite disturbance
- changes in energy level
- changes in alcohol / drug use

There is no good time to have a loved one die, but the adolescent and teen years may be the toughest.

As adults, it is important that we keep in mind that students are experiencing these grief reactions in addition to the normal adolescent changes that they will be, or maybe already are, struggling with, such as:

- bodily changes / puberty
- emotional upheaval
- identity issues
- peer acceptance / pressures
- issues of independence
- educational / career choices
- career goals

With the help of caring adults, even teens who face the devastating loss of a parent, sibling, or friend can survive, heal, and grow.

Excerpts from *Helping the Grieving Student* and *When Death Impacts Your School* / The Dougy Center (2003)

Too Soon

*A desk is empty,
a smiling face is gone.
The others look years older,
their tenderness touched
by pain.*

*Let them cry,
let them write, draw, sing
about their friend,
tell each other dreams
where he appears.*

*Let them ask the unanswered
question ... why?
and express the inexpressible
fear ... who next?*

*Later, when they are parents,
perhaps they'll remember,
how precious young life is,
and think again about their
classmate who left
too soon.*

Cathy Sosnowsky, TCF North Shore, BC

For support in your area contact:

THE COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS OF CANADA



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Grief in the Classroom



THE COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS OF CANADA

An international peer support
organization for bereaved parents
and their surviving children