

GRIEF: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HELPING STUDENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED A SIGNIFICANT LOSS

For School Counselors and School Psychologists:

Remember that children suffer losses and may grieve in different ways. Do not evaluate the child's grief by comparing it to the way you grieve as an adult. Tailor your interventions to be developmentally appropriate for the child.

Let the student know that it is normal to grieve. Do not deny their emotions or make judgmental comments as to how they should handle their feelings.

Suggest that the student might express grief, both verbally and nonverbally. Expressing a loss through art, music, poetry, being alone, or another type of memorial are some ways students have been helped. If a student wants to talk, be there for him/her, but respect their right not to talk.

Specific Interventions

Art Techniques: Pictures depicting grief can be an easier way for a student to express him/her emotions and may be a springboard to further discussion.

Music Techniques: The use of tones, rhythm sounds, and melodies can be very useful in expressing grief. For example, simple percussion instruments, autoharps, or the playing of recorded music (e.g., loud and dissonant or soft and flowing).

Body Movement: With music or alone children can express feelings by imitating the sort of animal they feel like they are (lion, mouse, dinosaur) or by asking them to move in the way they are feeling.

Bibliotherapy: Stories about loss and death can help children express their feelings through identifying with characters in the stories. These books also help the child to feel less alone. Moody and Moody (1991) provide an excellent list of books; your school librarian may also be able to suggest some.

Play Therapy: The use of puppets, dolls, or stuffed animals to allow children to express their emotions through play they create may help the child to feel a sense of control over his/her feelings.

Help the child understand that loss and death bring on strong emotions that must be expressed. Working through grief may be difficult, but it is necessary. Let him/her know that anger and guilt are normal feelings. Allow students to ventilate their feelings.

Explain that all persons have high and low moments when they are recovering from significant losses. Assure them that they are not “going crazy” when they are at a low point.

Refrain from setting a timetable for children’s recovery. Every loss is unique for the persons involved and must be grieved by that person in his or her own time. Some heal rather quickly, others take longer.

Refrain from lecturing or making decisions for the students. Instead, help him/her examine the available alternatives.

Help students to be realistic with themselves in their grieving process. Encourage them to be patient with themselves and others who are grieving, not to expect too much too soon.

Encourage students to take “breaks” from grieving if they feel like it. Suggest that they spend time with their friends, to play with them and talk to them. Assure them that is it alright and normal to take such breaks.

Even though it is difficult, encourage students to eat properly, exercise, and get sufficient sleep and rest. Help them understand that they must take care of themselves physically.

Remember that people who have suffered significant losses need quiet time for healing. There may be occasions when you need to allow them some private, quiet time in school, away from the activities of the day.

Be encouraging and hopeful. Assure students that eventually they will feel better. Assure them that they will be able to remember the person or object that they have lost without it hurting so much. Assure them that good memories can never be taken away from them.

Be as reassuring and caring as possible. With all the anger, loneliness, guilt, and anxiety students may feel, they need some sense of security. Discipline and appropriate limits should continue to be set and enforced. Day-to-day routines help in the adjusting process, but children also need to feel a sense of caring. Counselors, psychologists, and teachers should show concern, support, and acceptance. An appropriate touch or hug may be needed at times.

Prior education about loss and the grieving process is crucial for students and faculty. Assemblies and/or smaller group discussions in classes should be provided for students to better understand the experience. In-services could be provided to educate

staff on the ways children grieve across developmental stages and appropriate ways to deal with them. These presentations could also be extended to programs for PTA and parents. The following references provide further information on these topics.

Be aware of self-help organizations that can be recommended to family members.

Help the child to visualize positive images. It is a good technique when life feels out of control.

For Parents and Teachers:

Children are concrete in their thinking, therefore, describe death concretely, avoid adding a large number of details, answer their questions simply and honestly and try to avoid euphemisms.

Some of the most basic feelings expressed in children are fear and uncertainty. They go through fear until they reach understanding. Be extra nurturing and attentive during this fearful time; this will help recover a sense of stability and dependability in life. Listen to their feelings of fear, and validate their feelings. If a child regresses, they may be searching for reassurance such as the care and attention they received as a baby.

Children are very likely to experience guilt. Unrealistic responsibility for a death gives the child a false reassurance that they could have prevented the death or future unwanted events. Remind them of the facts of the situation, and acknowledge that it is a difficult feeling to have. The child may need to feel the guilt until they are ready to face even more difficult feelings.

Children are repetitive in their grief, and asking questions and searching is part of their grief work. The questions may be indicative of their feelings of confusion and uncertainty, so try to listen and support their searching.

Remember that these feelings do not have quick cures. Allow them to talk about their particular experience or trauma. Avoid transferring your fears to the child.

Remember that a parent's death can be particularly difficult and confusing for children, affecting their sense of security, survival, and safety. Their expression of grief is usually consistent with their life experiences, cultural and social context, individual personality, and age. School age children can develop phobias, sleeping disorders, academic problems, and antisocial behaviors. When helping a child, look at the child as an individual and do not assume that each experience is identical.

Children need to feel safe within their worlds. Try to listen with respect to the student's feelings and concerns. They need authority figures to acknowledge their pain. By doing so, you send a message that feelings are "ok" and a very natural part of being human. Children who are treated with care and consideration grow into sensitive, caring adults.

Children need choices, because a death causes a frightening disruption in their lives. Having some say in what they do or what they avoid concerning the funeral or services will help them express their feelings about the death. Giving the child control will help to build on their self-esteem.

Children are often sent to school because the family may be struggling and think that a sense of normalcy may be helpful. As a teacher or counselor, one should encourage the grieving child to seek assistance if they are feeling unusually low or do not know how to handle a difficult situation.

Provide information to the professional staff about the stages of grieving that may occur. Children are different and their expression will depend on that child. Just have the staff be observant and report any unusual behaviors.

Teachers and counselors should be prepared to answer classmate's questions. This can help the other children to develop empathy and discover ways to be supportive of their friends during this difficult time.

Be careful to monitor games and songs you play with children. When death occurs, children may remember an instance when they were playing "step on the crack, break your mother's back..." and feel that their mistake was the cause of a parent's death. Be mindful and creative when choosing games.

Additional Resources:

Helping bereaved children: A handbook for practitioners. (2002). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Jones, E. (2001). *Bibliotherapy for bereaved children: Healing reading.* Philadelphia PA: J. Kingsley Publishers.

Mauk, G. & Sharpnack, J. (1997). Grief. In G.G. Bear & K.M. Minke, Children's needs II: Development, problems, and alternatives. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Rowling, L. (2003). *Grief in school communities: Effective support strategies.* Philadelphia, PA: Open University.

www.allkidsgrieve.org/classroom.html: Classroom Strategies for Grieving Children.

www.childgrief.net/info.htm: Children and Grief.

www.growthhouse.org/childgrv.html: Helping Children with Serious Illness and Grief.

www.nasponline.org/NEAT/grief.html: Helping Children Cope with Loss, Death, and Grief.

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