

5 Tips for Supporting Grieving Students

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May 17, 2013



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This blog was co-authored by David Schonfeld, MD, FAAP, director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement.

As our previous post highlighted, most teachers interact daily with grieving students. A recent poll we conducted in conjunction with the American Federation of Teachers found that the vast majority of teachers

would like to help the grieving children in their midst but feel that they lack the proper training. The good news is that teachers don't require extensive training to prepare them for making a positive difference in the lives of their grieving students. This post is intended to introduce some of the basic information.



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First and foremost, it's important to understand that you don't need to be an expert. Teachers can help most by simply being present with and attentive to grieving students as they express their feelings. Worried about how their parents or caregivers are adjusting, grieving students may actually find it safer to talk to you at first.

This doesn't mean that you need to serve as a grief counselor. Teachers are not expected to provide a therapeutic environment for a grieving student. Instead, they should foster a supportive environment -- and refer grieving children to specialists and other support services when appropriate.

No one can prevent a child's grief, but you can serve as a source of stability and comfort at one of the most crucial times in a student's life. The following five tips are intended to help you better support the grieving students in your midst:

1. Help Younger Students Understand What Has Happened

When speaking with young children about the death of a loved one, use the words "dead" and "died." Expressions such as "eternal rest" or "passed away" may confuse children and make it harder for them to understand what has happened. Reinforcing the basic realities of death -- that it is irreversible, that everyone eventually dies, and that there are physical reasons why someone dies -- helps remove common misconceptions and can decrease feelings of worry, guilt and shame that might accompany the death of a loved one.

2. Invite Older Students to Talk

In the wake of an immediate family member's death, older children can be overlooked -- or even looked to for supporting other family members. School, then, becomes a critical place for them to receive care from trusted adults. Older students may not be ready to talk when you offer to speak with them. They may prefer

time alone or talking with their friends. They might say that they don't need or wish to talk, even when they are actually feeling overwhelmed. Don't try to force the conversation. Help them identify other adults with whom they can speak when they are ready, such as a guidance counselor or mental health provider. Remain available and supportive, and continue offering to talk with them from time to time.

3. Allow Children to Express Themselves

The goal is not to take away the pain of grief, but to allow an opportunity for children to express it. Avoid comments aimed at trying to cheer up students who are grieving. (Examples: "At least you were able to spend Christmas with him before he died," or "At least he died a hero.") It is also a common impulse to share personal experiences about our own losses. But with grieving children, it's important to listen more and talk less. Give them space to express themselves rather than "turning the tables" by bringing up your own painful losses. You can also reassure students -- young children, in particular -- that they are not responsible for the death. Even when there is no reason to suspect they feel guilty, feelings of guilt are nearly universal in grieving children.

4. Reach Out to Parents or Caregivers and Offer Assistance

The grieving student's family should know how he or she is coping at school. Reach out to parents or caregivers and coordinate efforts. After the death of a family member, parents or caregivers may feel overwhelmed and unsure how to help their children. They generally welcome advice from school personnel and appreciate your concern.

5. Provide Learning Supports

Children often have difficulty concentrating or learning while they are grieving. They may benefit from tutoring, extra support, or temporary changes in their test schedules or other classroom demands. Don't wait for school problems to start before offering help. Talk to your students, their parents or caregivers, and other key people at the school, such as coaches, band directors and club sponsors. This network can help coordinate the support you provide.

The bottom line is this: during the week, kids spend as many of their waking hours in school as they do at home. Educators are literally on the "front lines" of the childhood grief issue -- and therefore have a huge opportunity to lend support. A little understanding can go a long way.

Resources

You can find these tips and more in "*Supporting Your Students After the Death of a Family Member or Friend*," a resource for educators written by David J. Schonfeld, M.D., and Marcia Quackenbush, M.S., with support from the New York Life Foundation and the American Federation of Teachers. Additional resources are available at New York Life's *A Child in Grief* and the AFT's *Supporting the Grieving Student*.