



Supporting the grieving child and family



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www.grievingstudents.org

USC Social Work

National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

University of Southern California

Loss is common in the lives of children



- Vast majority of children experience the death of a family member and/or friend by the time they complete high school
- 5% of children experience death of parent by 16

Children may not appear to be grieving



- Adults may communicate death is not discussed
- Children may
 - not yet understand what has happened or its implications
 - be overwhelmed by feelings
 - express grief indirectly through behavior or play
 - choose to keep their losses private

Often adults say nothing



- Adults are afraid to say the wrong thing, upset children, or make matters worse
- Saying nothing says a lot – it communicates that adults are unconcerned, uncaring, or unable to be of assistance
- Leaves young children confused, older children unsupported, and requires children of all ages to grieve alone

Being with someone in distress



- Do not try to “cheer up” survivors
- Do not encourage to be strong or cover emotions
- Express feelings and demonstrate empathy
- Avoid statements such as: “I know exactly what you are going through” (you can’t), “You must be angry” (don’t tell person how to feel), “Both my parents died when I was your age” (don’t compete for sympathy)
- Allow child/family to be upset and tolerate unpleasant affect, without trying to change it. Accept reactions while suspending judgment – intervene only when safety/health is concern

Addressing cultural diversity



- Some people are worried they will say or do the wrong thing because they feel ill informed about another culture
- Although there are differences in cultural practices, the fundamental experience of grief is universal
- When we recognize that there is a range of ways to experience and express grief, we can explore ways to bridge cultural differences in order to help grieving children and families

Supporting children of a different culture



- Ask questions when you are unsure what would be most helpful for a family or individual
- Assumptions may result in stereotypes that cloud our perceptions and make us miss opportunities to be helpful
- Approach the family with an open mind and heart
- Help families identify and communicate what is important to them about cultural practices; work with them to find solutions and compromises when realities require modifications in cultural practices

Children's guilt



- Thought processes limited by:
 - Egocentrism
 - Limited understanding of causality
 - Magical thinking
- Results in guilt
 - Reassure children of lack of responsibility

Misconceptions & literal misinterpretations



- For young children, thought processes are concrete and literal
- Religious explanations can be shared, but should not be only explanation of death

www.achildgrief.com



After a loved one dies—
How children grieve and how parents
and other adults can support them.

Adolescent bereavement



- Adults assume that because adolescents have ability to think rationally they need no further explanations
- They assume since adolescents often less amenable to adult guidance, they do not need support
- In reality, adolescents do, but often left unsupported
- Parents often rely on adolescent children to provide comfort and take on adult responsibilities

Provide advice on how to support child



- Funeral attendance
- Be aware of community resources and offer them to families
- Provide follow-up – remember that grieving is long-term

Helpful responses to a grief trigger



- Provide a safe space or an adult the student can talk to
- Set procedures for the student to obtain support
- Let the student call a parent or family member if necessary
- Provide permission and encouragement to see school nurse or counselor
- Offer private time with teacher to talk about feelings

Importance of professional self-care



- Recognize it is distressing to be with children who are in distress
- It's critical staff find ways to have their own personal needs met and appreciate and address impact of supporting children who are grieving or traumatized
- Create a culture where:
 - it is ok to be upset
 - members normalize asking for help and model willingness to accept assistance

Coalition to Support Grieving Students



- American Federation of School Administrators (AFSA)
- American Federation of Teachers (AFT)
- American School Counselors Association (ASCA)
- National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)
- National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)
- National Association of School Nurses (NASN)
- National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)
- National Education Association (NEA)
- School Social Workers Association of America (SSWAA)
- School Superintendents Association (AASA)



COALITION TO SUPPORT
GRIEVING STUDENTS

Video and Downloadable Grief Support
Modules for School Personnel

Conversation & Support

Talking With Children >

What Not to Say >

Providing Support Over Time >

Peer Support >

VIEW MODULES



Conversation &
Support

Developmental &
Cultural Considerations

Practical
Considerations

Reactions & Triggers

Professional
Preparation & Self-Care

Crisis & Special
Circumstances

Modules Placed into Six Sections



- Each section contains 2-4 video modules; each video is accompanied by handout that summarizes major points
- Conversation and Support
- Developmental and Cultural Considerations
- Practical Considerations
- Reactions and Triggers
- Professional Preparation and Self-Care
- Crisis and Other Special Circumstances

Additional Resources



- Guidance Documents
 - Practical guidelines developed by the NCSCB on how to respond to the death of a student or staff
- Parent booklet: *After a Loved One dies – How Children Grieve and How to Support Them*
- Articles
- Online Resources
 - Achildingrief.com



National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

Initial Funding: September 11th Children's Fund & National Philanthropic Trust

Current support: New York Life Foundation

- Promote appreciation of role schools can serve to support students, staff, and families at times of crisis and loss
- Enhance training in professional education programs
- Serve as resource for information, training materials, consultation and technical assistance – provided at no charge to schools
- **www.schoolcrisiscenter.org**

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Website resources

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USC School
of Social Work
*National Center for School
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COALITION *to* SUPPORT
GRIEVING STUDENTS

AAP Children and Disasters – www.aap.org/disasters

– Coping and adjustment:

www.aap.org/disasters/adjustment

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For further information

USC School of Social Work

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Gortimer Gibbons' Life on Normal Street



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jikz6c84O-Q>

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