

Student Grief, Advise for Adults with Children

* Tell the truth. Before telling the class, get as much information as possible from the family about the death. Tell the class what happened in terms that are appropriate to their own cognitive and developmental levels. For example, children may be concerned about whether the person was in pain, or why someone did not stop the death. If the person died in surgery, the professional and the teacher will need to be able to discuss the rarity of this occurrence and that the surgery itself did not cause the death (if that is true). Accurate information is central to the child's ability to analyze events and draw personally relevant conclusions.

* Avoid giving unnecessary information that would only serve to distress or confuse the children. Avoid creating mental images of frightening or horrifying sights. Dispel any "Halloween" type myths, which are common among elementary age children. Elementary age children think very concretely. Therefore, explain concretely what happened. Hearing the truth may help to stop rumors. Out of their own anxiety, children will need to talk about the death, and if they don't have accurate information they may distort the truth. For example, other children told a five-year-old boy, whose father was killed by a gunshot, that his father was a "bad guy" because only "bad guys" get killed. Young children especially may need repeated reassurance that rumors are not true.

* Allow for expression/affirm all expressions. After telling the children set aside at least 30 minutes to allow them the opportunity to share their feelings about it. A student may say, "I'm glad it didn't happen to me." That is a very honest response. It should be affirmed, not as self-centered, but as honest. If a student begins to cry let the child know that feeling sad at a time like this is very normal. Crying over something that is very sad is different from acting like a baby. Overly distraught children should be referred to the Crisis Team or a counselor.

* Written expressions. Set aside time for written expressions for the bereaved child. Notes, letters, or pictures created for the bereaved child can mean a lot. The class can decide if they want their notes and pictures to be taken to the home before the child returns to school, or if they want to wait until the bereaved child returns. ALWAYS screen these projects before delivering them. Older elementary children can be amazingly cruel out of their own fear and anxiety. Insensitive expressions signal a need for emotional help.

* Plan for the bereaved child's return. Guide the class in deciding what to say and how to act when the bereaved child returns to school. The subject should not be ignored, yet not every student should expect the bereaved child to want to talk about it. In addition to the death in the family, it is devastating for the bereaved child to be abandoned by friends at school, thus experiencing another psychological loss. Classmates might acknowledge it with a statement like; "I'm glad you're back. I'm really sorry your mother died," and then treat the child as they did before the death. Closer friends might say, "I feel so bad for you and I would like for you to tell me about it when you feel ready."

* Look for trouble signs when the bereaved child returns. Some elementary age children will want to stay home following a death, possibly out of fear. "Will I die?" or "Will someone else I love die?" are common fears. Staying home should be discouraged. Bereaved children are easily distracted and they are frequently confused and forgetful. Emotional outbursts of anger are common. Stomachaches, headaches, eating and sleeping disorders may increase because grief is physical as well as emotional. When these things happen, children need acceptance and support more than discipline. They need to feel they are loved in spite of their behavior.

Discipline should not be relaxed during bereavement, nor should it be enhanced. Teachers should expect and accept regression in the quality of work of the bereaved student. A graduated curriculum may be necessary. The child may be assigned the same homework, only less of it, to maintain self esteem despite lowered concentration. After school tutoring may become necessary if the quality of the student's work is seriously diminished.

<http://district.auburn.cnyric.org/teachers/crisis/crisis2>

What to say to someone who has lost a loved one

It is common to feel awkward when trying to comfort someone who is grieving. Many people do not know what to say or do. The following are suggestions to use as a guide.

- Acknowledge the situation. Example: "I heard that your_____ died." Use the word "died" That will show that you are more open to talk about how the person really feels.
- Express your concern. Example: "I'm sorry to hear that this happened to you."
- Be genuine in your communication and don't hide your feelings. Example: "I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care."
- Offer your support. Example: "Tell me what I can do for you."
- Ask how he or she feels, and don't assume you know how the bereaved person feels on any given day.

Source: *American Cancer Society*

The Grief of Children

There is no road map for a child to follow when he or she is grieving the loss of a sibling or classmate. Children are apt to bottle up their feelings around adults, especially adults who also are grieving. Students who have suffered the death of a brother or sister are often referred to as the "forgotten mourners" because so much attention is paid to the parents of the child who has died. Students who have a classmate die may feel the same way, depending on the level of support received both at home and at school. As a result, their actions and behavior in the classroom and with other children may reflect this. While no one can know what children are thinking, cues can be taken from their behavior.

You may notice many different reactions: withdrawal, aggressiveness, anger, panic, anxiety, guilt, fear, regression, and symptoms of bodily distress. Observe, and exercise patience and understanding.

When children are grieving, they have shortened attention spans and may have trouble concentrating, which in turn will affect their schoolwork.

While children might attempt to deny feelings of anger, hurt, and fear by repressing them, eventually grief takes over and their feelings leak out. Children have to reestablish a self-identity, whether because of their changed families at home or their changed "second families" at school.

Perceptions of Death

A child's understanding of death changes with age and experience. Preschool- and kindergarten-age children usually see death as temporary. Those ages 6 to 8 generally understand the child will not return and death is universal (it could happen to me). Children ages 9 to 12 do understand the reality of death and may be curious about the biological aspects of death. Children 13 years of age and older fully understand the concept of death and perceive death on an adult level and will mourn accordingly.

Understanding Feelings of Grief

When a student or a brother or sister of a student dies, teachers should examine their own feelings about death and

grief. Share your feelings with the children within your class. Know that it's okay to cry, be sad or angry, and even smile. Children cannot be shielded from death and grief, and a thoughtful approach taken in the classroom can help them in the future.

If a student seeks you out to talk, be available and really listen. Hear with your ears, your eyes, and your heart. A warm hug says, "I know what happened and I care. I am here if you need me."

Be open and honest with your feelings. Create an atmosphere of open acceptance that invites questions and fosters confidence that you are concerned.

Encourage children to express their grief openly, but in ways that are not disruptive to the class or damaging to other students. Acknowledge the reality that grief hurts, but do not attempt to rescue the child (or the class, or yourself) from that pain. Be supportive and available to classmates who may want to know how they can help.

Provide a quiet, private place where a student may go whenever he or she feels a need to be alone. Almost anything that happens in the classroom may trigger tears. Respect the need that students have to grieve while helping classmates realize that grief is a natural and normal reaction to loss.

Help students to recognize that death is a natural part of life. Use such opportunities as a fallen leaf, a wilted flower, and the death of an insect, bird, or class pet to discuss death as a part of the life cycle. Explore feelings about death, loss, and grief through books while fostering discussions as a classroom family.

Grief in the Classroom

Remember that the class functions as a group, and sharing grief may benefit the entire class. Thus, students can be exposed to death in a safe and caring atmosphere where the grieving children find people who are compassionate and supportive.

When a student has lost a sibling, try not to single out the grieving child for special privileges or compensations. While this is tempting, the student needs to feel a part of the peer group and should be expected to function accordingly. Temper your expectations with kindness and understanding, but continue to expect the student to function.

If possible, meet with a few of the bereaved student's friends to help them cope and explore how to be supportive. Friends often feel uncomfortable and awkward in their attempts to make contact.

Help a bereaved student find a supportive peer group. Oftentimes there are other students within the school or school district who are coping with similar losses. An invitation to share with each other might be welcome.

https://www.compassionatefriends.org/Brochures/suggestions_for_teachers_and_school_counselors.aspx

Here are a few suggestions, from one who has been there (*there* being the receiving end of such comfort) on how you can help your friend--or relative, neighbor, coworker, or classmate--through one of the most trying periods of a person's life: the grieving period immediately following a loved one's death.

First, be honest, be real, and above all, be *yourself*. Your friend will not want you to try to be someone you aren't because tragedy has struck her life. In fact, she will need to be able to depend on the person she knows you to be--the person she liked enough to allow into her heart as her friend

before she was grieving. She will need the "genuine article" to help bring her a sense of stability at a time when her world may seem to be spinning out of control.

Don't be afraid to tell her that you are SO sorry for her loss (since I'm sure that you are.)

Even when you can't seem to find the right words to express your deepest feelings, those three words, "I'm so sorry," spoken with undisguised emotion, can communicate volumes to a person who is grieving! Then, honestly admit to her that you just don't know what to say but you want her to know that you are there for her. She will appreciate your honesty. Give her a hug, and then be prepared to listen! Be patient, loving, understanding, and kind while she deals with the initial shock of her loved one's death, which can be quite disorienting.

Don't worry if she walks around in a daze at times--particularly at first, when the tragedy is fresh in her mind and heart and she hasn't fully processed the reality of it. This is natural. This is her mind's way of protecting itself from the emotional trauma that sudden death so savagely forces upon us. During those times, she will be somewhat insulated from feeling her loss so acutely. A certain degree of denial--or inability to accept the loss of her loved one--is also normal. Again, this is a protective mechanism that our minds initiate when circumstances in our lives are too traumatic to accept all at once. In time it will lessen and usually will not present a problem if not greatly prolonged.

Don't pressure her to eat. She will probably not have much of an appetite at first--especially right after the incident that caused her loved one's death, and even more so if she happened to be present to witness it. You needn't worry about this. You may offer her food, but do so gently, compassionately, and without pressure. In a short time, this too will pass, and her appetite will return to normal. At first, she may walk around "starving" for hours but simply not be able to bring herself to eat. But she will be OK. You must be patient. Yet it never hurts to offer a gentle reminder now and then--or even to bring her a little something, since she herself is too preoccupied, or too anesthetized, to deal with such mundane matters.

Allow her to cry whenever she feels the need, without letting *yourself* be embarrassed by her tears or thinking that you will be helping her if you can get her to stop. Crying is an important part of her healing and is actually good therapy, because it is very cleansing to the emotions. During periods of grief, crying is a very good sign. It means that the bereaved person is squarely facing the pain of

her loss, rather than avoiding or denying it. She needs to allow herself to grieve--and so do *you*. Just hold her while she weeps. This will be a great comfort to her.

If she becomes angry over her loss, allow her to vent, offering her a sympathetic ear. Not everyone will experience the anger phase of grief, but those who do should not be made to feel guilty about it. After a time, however, if she remains in that angry place, try to gently coax her out of it, injecting a mellow dose of reason into your conversations with her and offering a fresh perspective. This will help to create emotional balance and hopefully will also enable her to let go of any bitterness she may still be harboring over her loss.

And please don't be afraid to talk about the loved one who has died, fearing that it might upset her! Her grief is always with her, whether you talk about her loved one or not. She will need to come to terms with her loss, and part of the process includes talking about things her loved one has said or done, positive or negative aspects of his or her personality, feelings of guilt or regret that she may have, and even the death itself. Let your friend take the lead, though; then gently join her in her reminiscences and encourage her to begin to look toward the future as soon as she is able.

Offer to help her in every way you can. If she will receive it, point her toward God, who is the greatest Comforter of all after the death of a loved one. Having personally experienced the death of someone close very suddenly and unexpectedly--and having been fortunate enough to have the loving support of family and friends--I *know* that such compassionate gestures are helpful.

<http://sumonova.com/how-to-comfort-a-friend-after-the-death-of-someone-close/>