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PSYCHOLOGISTS

Helping Children Cope With Loss, Death, and Grief Tips for Teachers and Parents

Schools and communities around the country will be impacted by the loss of life associated with the war in Iraq. The effects may be significant for some people because of their emotional closeness to the war and/or their concern over terrorism. How school personnel handle the resulting distress can help shape the immediate and longer-term grieving process for students, staff, and families. Children, in particular, will need the love and support of their teachers and parents to cope with their loss and reach constructive grief resolution.

Expressions of Grief

Talking to children about death must be geared to their developmental level, respectful of their cultural norms, and sensitive to their capacity to understand the situation. Children will be aware of the reactions of significant adults as they interpret and react to information about death and tragedy. In fact, for primary grade children adult reactions will play an especially important role in shaping their perceptions of the situation. The range of reactions that children display in response to the death of significant others may include:

- **Emotional shock** and at times an apparent lack of feelings, which serve to help the child detach from the pain of the moment;
- **Regressive (immature) behaviors**, such as needing to be rocked or held, difficulty separating from parents or significant others, needing to sleep in parent's bed or an apparent difficulty completing tasks well within the child's ability level;
- **Explosive emotions and acting out behavior** that reflect the child's internal feelings of anger, terror, frustration and helplessness. Acting out may reflect insecurity and a way to seek control over a situation for which they have little or no control;
- **Asking the same questions over and over**, not because they do not understand the facts, but rather because the information is so hard to believe or accept. Repeated questions can help listeners determine if the child is responding to misinformation or the real trauma of the event.

Helping Children Cope

The following tips will help teachers, parents, and other caregivers support children who have experienced the loss of parents, friends, or loved ones. Some of these recommendations come from Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado.

- **Allow children to be the teachers about their grief experiences:** Give children the opportunity to tell their story and be a good listener.
- **Don't assume that every child in a certain age group understands death in the same way or with the same feelings:** All children are different and their view of the world is unique and shaped by different experiences. (Developmental information is provided below.)
- **Grieving is a process, not an event:** Parents and schools need to allow adequate time for each child to grieve in the manner that works for that child. Pressing children to resume "normal" activities without the chance to deal with their emotional pain may prompt additional problems or negative reactions.

- **Early Elementary School:** Children at this age (approximately 5-9) start to comprehend the finality of death. They begin to understand that certain circumstances may result in death. They can see that, if large planes crash into buildings, people in the planes and buildings will be killed. In case of war images, young children may not be able to differentiate between what they see on television, and what might happen in their own neighborhood. However, they may over-generalize, particularly at ages 5-6—if jet planes don't fly, then people don't die. At this age, death is perceived as something that happens to others, not to oneself or one's family.
- **Middle School:** Children at this level have the cognitive understanding to comprehend death as a final event that results in the cessation of all bodily functions. They may not fully grasp the abstract concepts discussed by adults or on the TV news but are likely to be guided in their thinking by a concrete understanding of justice. They may experience a variety of feelings and emotions, and their expressions may include acting out or self-injurious behaviors as a means of coping with their anger, vengeance and despair.
- **High School:** Most teens will fully grasp the meaning of death in circumstances such as an automobile accident, illness and even the World Trade Center or Pentagon disasters. They may seek out friends and family for comfort or they may withdraw to deal with their grief. Teens (as well as some younger children) with a history of depression, suicidal behavior and chemical dependency are at particular risk for prolonged and serious grief reactions and may need more careful attention from home and school during these difficult times.

Tips for Children and Teens with Grieving Friends and Classmates

Seeing a friend try to cope with a loss may scare or upset children who have had little or no experience with death and grieving. Following are some suggestions teachers and parents can provide to children and youth to deal with this "secondary" loss.

- Particularly with younger children, it will be important to help clarify their understanding of death. See tips above under "helping children cope."
- Seeing their classmates' reactions to loss may bring about some fears of losing their own parents or siblings, particularly for students who have family in the military or other risk related professions. Children need reassurance from caregivers and teachers that their own families are safe. For children who have experienced their own loss (previous death of a parent, grandparent, sibling), observing the grief of a friend can bring back painful memories. These children are at greater risk for developing more serious stress reactions and should be given extra support as needed.
- Children (and many adults) need help in communicating condolence or comfort messages. Provide children with age-appropriate guidance for supporting their peers. Help them decide what to say (e.g., "Steve, I am so sorry about your father. I know you will miss him very much. Let me know if I can help you with your paper route....") and what to expect (see "expressions of grief" above).
- Help children anticipate some changes in friends' behavior. It is important that children understand that their grieving friends may act differently, may withdraw from their friends for a while, might seem angry or very sad, etc., but that this does not mean a lasting change in their relationship.
- Explain to children that their "regular" friendship may be an important source of support for friends and classmates. Even normal social activities such as inviting a friend over to play, going to the park, playing sports, watching a movie, or a trip to the mall may offer a much needed distraction and sense of connection and normalcy.
- Children need to have some options for providing support—it will help them deal with their fears and concerns if they have some concrete actions that they can take to help. Suggest making cards, drawings,

Sample Letter to Staff

Date:

To: All Staff

From: INSERT NAME OF SCHOOL Crisis Team

Re: INSERT NAME OF DECEASED

The recent death of (Insert Name) (has OR is expected to make) a significant impact on our entire school community. Our crisis team has been mobilized to respond to this tragic event.

On (insert date), (Insert name of deceased)¹ (INSERT brief facts about the death)². We expect a variety of reactions to this loss from our students, parents, and members of our staff. Some of these reactions may be mild, others may be more intense.

To effectively assist all members of our school community, an emergency staff meeting will be held at (Insert time) on (Insert date) in the (Insert place such as the cafeteria or other large area). At that time, our crisis team will provide further details and answer questions. We will also discuss how to present the information to our students. In the meantime, please refer all inquiries from outside sources to (Insert name of the Media or Communication Coordinator).

With students, you can acknowledge that this death has occurred. However, please avoid discussion of any details; simply tell students that the school staff will provide information to everyone shortly. Please refer any student who appears to be in crisis or having significant difficulty to (Insert name of Counseling Services Coordinator). As this tragedy has also effected our staff, we encourage you to also seek assistance from (Insert name of Counseling Services Coordinator), if desired.

Emergency Staff Meeting

Time:

Date:

Location:

If you have any questions or concerns before the meeting, please contact (Insert name of Crisis Team Coordinator).

Examples of information to insert in the opening paragraph:

¹John Smith, one of our 9th grade students
Mrs. Jones, who taught 7th grade English

²was killed in an automobile accident
died after a long-illness
died suddenly

committed suicide (*before inserting this information, be sure the immediate family is fine with this information being released*)

Sample Letter to Parents

Date

Dear Parent,

It is with deep regret that we inform you about a recent loss to our school community. On (INSERT date), (INSERT name of the deceased)¹ (INSERT brief facts about the death)². This loss is sure to raise many emotions, concerns, and questions for our entire school, especially our students.

Our school (and INSERT name of school district, if applicable) has a Crisis Intervention Team made up of a professionals trained to help with the needs of students, parents, and school personnel at difficult times such as this. At our school (or INSERT name of alternative school), we have counselors available for any student who may need or want help or any type of assistance surrounding this loss. We encourage you, as parents, to also feel free to use our resources.

We have enclosed some information that may be useful to you in helping your child at home. If you would like additional information or need assistance, please do not hesitate to contact (INSERT name of Communications Coordinator or Counseling Services Coordinator) at (INSERT phone number).

We are saddened by the loss to our school community and will make every effort to help you and your child as you need.

Sincerely,

(Type the name of the signer and title. This letter is usually signed by the principal, superintendent, or crisis team coordinator)

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Help at School

Before a grieving student returns to the classroom, teachers should prepare other students in the class with the following steps:

- Explain the basic facts of what happened.
- Dispel any rumors.
- Explain the ways grief can express itself.
- Make students aware of what and how they say things.
- Give students examples of how they can help the returning student.
- Ask for volunteers to help tutor or partner with the returning student.
- Plan a "catch-up day" to help the returning student and any other students who are behind catch up with homework due to missed days. (This can be done on a regular basis so the student does not feel singled out.)

Teachers should also:

- Find out what resources are available on campus and within the district.
- Evaluate the work the student has missed and select the most important assignments, tests and quizzes for the student to make up.
- Be available to the student—set up a weekly/biweekly conference time to review grades, talk about progress and how to continue reinforcing acclimation and success.
- Work closely with the other teachers and school counselors involved with the grieving student.
- Keep in contact with the student's parent(s) or guardian(s). This can be done via e-mail, phone and with a weekly grade check or progress report.
- Be sensitive throughout the year—especially around holidays, birthdays and anniversaries.

Counselors and social workers should:

- Find what out what resources are available on campus and within the district.
- Update teachers regularly on the student.
- Meet with the grieving student on a regular basis.
- Work closely with the other teachers and school counselors involved with the grieving student.
- Keep in contact with the student's parent(s) or guardian(s). This can be done via e-mail, phone, and with a weekly grade check or progress report.
- Be sensitive throughout the year, especially around holidays, birthdays and anniversaries.

Here are some ways teachers and classmates can help grieving students get back on track with their school lives:

Problem: Forgetfulness

The student may forget textbooks, supplies, tests, assignments, or reports.

Solution

- Establish and reinforce routines and schedules.
- Have extra textbooks and supplies available in case they are forgotten.
- Have students write down important dates and information—even create a simple agenda form for the student to use.

More this way 

Problem: Lack of concentration

The student may have a difficult time staying focused and appear to be "day dreaming."

Solution

- Refocus student.
- Break information into smaller segments.
- Assign a partner, study-buddy.
- Allow ample time to complete the assignment or task.
- Provide breaks as needed.

Problem: Lack of interest or motivation

The student may appear to be uninterested or even display a "why bother" attitude. He/she may be focusing on everything that has happened and may question the importance/relevance of school work.

Solution

- Meet weekly/biweekly to review grade, progress, problem areas.
- Encourage the student to use his/her experience to reach out to others.

Problem: Lack of organization

It may take a grieving student a lot longer to accomplish a given task. What once took 15 minutes to finish may now take an hour.

Solution

- Refocus student.
- Provide an agenda to help keep track of assignments and tests.
- Assign a partner to administer the test, quiz, project, or assignment.
- Allow ample time to complete a task.

Problem: Inability to retain information

The student may have difficulty retaining information. Help the student change study habits by providing notes and using some of the following tips. It may help to have the student do this initially with a partner and then alone.

Solution

- Outline reading material.
- Highlight important facts.
- Read "out loud" instead of silently.
- Complete homework in 20-minute segments with 5-minute breaks.

Problem: Preoccupation with the event

Students may appear to be "day dreaming" because their minds will wander back to what has happened. Even if they are doing something they enjoy, they will find their mind drifting back to the loss experience.

Solution

- Refocus student.
- Work on smaller amounts of information.
- Work in shorter increments of time.

Problem: Impatience and lowered tolerance

Grieving students may be impatient—especially if a peer complains of something trivial.

Solution

Make other students aware of what and how they say things around the grieving student.

- Have the student write about this frustration in a journal entry or work it into class discussion as it applies to the lesson (theme of a short story, current event, etc.).
- Remind the grieving student that other students may not have experienced a loss on that level and do not necessarily mean to be shallow or unfeeling/unthinking.
- Help the grieving student find a healthy outlet of expression for this frustration.

Problem: Drop in grades

Students may experience a drop in grades due to absences and all of the problems listed above. Make-up work may seem too overwhelming.

Solution

- Conference with the student, counselor and parent/guardian, and identify the most important assignments/ tests/quizzes requiring make-up.
- Create a reasonable timeline for make-up work.
- Assign a class partner/tutor to help.
- Have the student complete only the designated work.
- Provide a weekly grade check to help student and parent/guardian monitor progress.