NASP
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF School Psychologists

School Safety and Crisis

Addressing Grief: Tips for Teachers and Administrators

School-based support and increased understanding are essential when a student experiences the death of a friend or loved one. While each student will be affected differently depending on his or her developmental level, cultural beliefs, personal characteristics, family situation, and previous experiences. There are some strategies that can be helpful in supporting bereaved students.

GENERAL TIPS TO SUPPORT STUDENTS OF ALL AGES

- Be understanding and tolerant of common grief reactions which include: decreased appetite, difficulty sleeping, a decreased ability to concentrate, increased sadness, and social withdrawal. Students sometimes also feel anger toward the deceased for leaving them.
- Be simple and straightforward. Discuss death in developmentally appropriate terms for students.
  - Use words such as "death," "die," or "dying" in your conversations and avoid euphemisms such as "they went away," "they are sleeping," "departed," and "passed away." Such euphemisms are abstract and may be confusing, especially for younger children.
  - Let students know that death is not contagious. Although all human beings will die at some point, death is not something that can be "caught" and it is unusual for children to die.
- Be brief and patient. Remember that you may have to answer the same question multiple times and repeat key information to ensure understanding.
- Listen, acknowledge feelings, and be nonjudgmental.
- Express your own feelings in an open, calm, and appropriate way that encourages students to share their feelings and grief.
- Avoid making assumptions and imposing your own beliefs on students.
- A variety of feelings are normal. Be sensitive to each student's experience, as there is no one right way to respond to a loss. Feelings and behaviors will vary across students and will change throughout the bereavement process.
- Normalize expressed feelings by telling students such are common after a death. However, if their expressions include risk to self (e.g. suicidal thoughts) or others, refer immediately to the appropriate professionals.
- Be sensitive to cultural differences of students and their families in expressing grief and honoring the dead.
- Consider a student's intellectual abilities, behavior, and conceptual understanding of death. For children with developmental disabilities, their limited communication skills do not mean they are unaffected by the death. Behaviors such as increased frustration and compulsivity, somatic complaints, relationship difficulties, and increased self-stimulatory behaviors may be expressions of grief.

- Maintain a normal routine in your classroom and engage students in activities they previously enjoyed.
- Provide the opportunity to talk and ask questions and use these questions to guide further discussion. Encourage students to share feelings, but in ways that are not disruptive to the class or hurtful to other students.
- Keep in mind that some children may have a difficult time expressing their feelings or may not feel comfortable talking at school. Do not pressure these students to talk. Some may prefer writing, drawing, listening to music, or playing a game instead of talking about their feelings. Provide students with a variety of options for expressing grief.
- Talk to the bereaved student's classmates about grief and emphasize the importance of being understanding and sensitive.
- Help bereaved students find a peer support group. There will likely be other who have also experienced the death of a loved one.

TIPS WHEN THE WHOLE SCHOOL IS AFFECTED BY A TEACHER OR STUDENT DEATH

- A letter and/or direct communication via email should be sent home to all parents on school letterhead informing them of the death. Information to include in the communication:
  - Facts about the death to dispel rumors
  - Discussion of the range of feelings and reactions that may occur throughout the grief process
  - Guidance about talking to their children about the death
  - Indicators of the need for mental health counseling
  - Direction on how to contact the school if they have questions or believe their child may benefit from counseling
  - Direction on how to obtain community resources
- Share factual information with staff (through meetings and bulletins), students (through class announcements and meetings), and parents (through letters/email). Regularly provide them with relevant updates.
- Provide teachers with guidelines on how to share information about the death with their students and establish referral procedures for students requiring additional support.
- Pay close attention to students who have experienced recent deaths or key life changes, witnessed the death, or have emotional problems.

TIPS FOR SPECIFIC AGE GROUPS

PRESCHOOL

- Avoid euphemisms as preschoolers have trouble understanding death and may believe the death is reversible.
- Provide opportunities to express thoughts and feelings about death through play activities and drawing.
- Answer questions using concrete descriptions and be prepared to repeatedly answer questions.
- Possible reactions include:
  - Crying or screaming

- Clinging to caregivers or other trusted adults
- Fear of separation
- Regressive behaviors such as wetting pants and thumb sucking
- Decreased verbalization

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

- These students may ask questions and seek to try to understand what happened. Be patient and refer them to adults that can answer their questions.
- Students below the age of eight may engage in magical thinking and believe they could have prevented the death. Recognize these feelings and fears but do not validate them.
- Students ages nine through twelve may feel less comfortable showing feelings and seeing expressions of grief in others. Make sure to provide these students with a variety of ways to express grief.
- Possible reactions include:
  - Behavioral difficulties
  - Decreased concentration
  - Poor school performance
  - Depression
  - Irritability
  - Withdrawal
  - Somatic complaints (headaches & stomachaches)

MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL

- Do not force students to share their feelings with others, including their peers if they do not feel comfortable. Provide them with opportunities to share their feelings privately.
- Students often seek support via social media. Be aware of what is being posted and shared. Encourage students to seek support for a friend in need.
- Students in their mid-to-late teens tend to feel more comfortable expressing their feelings and grief similar to adults.
- High school students may use physical contact to show their support and empathy (e.g., hugging or touching the arm)
- Possible reactions include:
  - Poor school performance
  - Anxiety
  - Depression
  - High risk behaviors or substance use
  - Emotional numbing
  - Suicidal thoughts

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