

A Guide for Teachers about Grieving Students
Provided by Willow House (Chicago, IL)
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Grieving students do not need for you to become an instant counselor. They do need for you to be there for them by letting them talk about their fears, concerns and feelings. They need to feel safe and not judged by peers or supervisors.

It's not always easy for teachers to know for sure that a student is mourning the loss of a family member or friend, but some telltale signs include:

- Sudden and unexplained absence from school
- Withdrawal from contact with friends and classmates
- Unexpected displays of emotion, such as walking out of class or crying during class
- Difficulty concentrating
- Decline in academic performance
- Disheveled, fatigued appearance

There are a variety of experiences that a teacher can encounter once death enters a classroom. And there is no single foolproof method for helping a student through this troubled time but, based on years of experience, I have developed and recommend the following approach:

Have a plan

If possible, help the grieving student identify what he or she dreads most about returning to school after the death of a loved one. Come up with a support group for the student or a friend or counselor who the student can go to if the emotional strain becomes too much to bear. Find out how the student would like you to relate his or her loss to the class. Offer creative ideas for ways the student can cope with his or her feelings, such as keeping a journal or making sketches.

Talk openly and frankly about the death

This is a sign of respect for the students' integrity and is essential for a teacher's credibility. However, don't force students to talk about the death if they don't want to. Ask a grieving student before he or she returns to school what would work best for them. If the student would like to discuss the death with the class, the teacher should set the tone of the discussion the first day back. Remind students to listen to their grieving classmate and not to minimize or deny their peer's pain. After sharing, let the student decide whether to "return to normal" or opt for more discussion. The opportunity to talk about a death helps "normalize" the event as students hear that others have had similar experiences and provides an outlet for emotional stress.

Stick to a normal school day routine

It is usually better for students to go to school, because there is a comforting sense of routine. Often at times such as this, students feel as if life is out of control. Teachers, however, should not expect academic performance to be at the same level as previously. The student will need time to process the meaning and impact of the death. Lighten the homework load. Give incompletes rather than fail a grieving student.

Set up a Safe Room

A Safe Room is useful when students are mourning a death. The room could be a counselor's office or a classroom. Its purpose is to provide students with a safe place to process their feelings of grief, which can often be overwhelming.

Provide Supportive Activities

The purpose is to provide students with opportunities to process their feelings and the meaning of the loss for themselves and to vent their feelings through discussion one on one or in small groups with trained staff members.

Activities that will allow the class to process their feelings about a death will vary according to age group, but general projects that are appropriate for both teenagers and younger children include:

- Writing condolence letters or cards to the family
- Reading fictional or factual accounts about other people's losses
- Drawing pictures that represent grief and loss. For younger children, ask: "If sadness were an animal, what would it look like?"
- Organizing a memorial activity for a deceased teacher or staff member. Let a few months pass after the death, though, so that students will have time to process their feelings.
- If a teacher or staff member has died, bringing in outside specialists such as a nurse or doctor to discuss relevant aspects of the death that may have kids puzzled, such as the disease itself, or end-of-life care.

Recommended Book List:

For Elementary School Students:

"After Charlotte's Mom Died" by Cornelia Spelman
"Everett Anderson's Goodbye" by Lucille Clifton & Ann Grifalconi
"Rachel and the Upside Down Heart" by Eileen Douglas
"The Tenth Good Thing About Barney" by Judith Viorst
"The Next Place" by Warren Hanson

For High School Students:

"How It Feels When a Parent Dies" by Jill Kremetz
"Learning to Say Goodbye: When a Parent Dies" by Eda Leshen
"Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers" by Earl Grollman

For Parents:

"How Do We Tell the Children" by Dan Schaefer
"Talking About Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child" by Earl Grollman
"Necessary Losses" by Judith Viorst

For more resources on the grief of children & teens, visit

www.beliefnet.com www.compassionbooks.com

For information on local bereavement programs, visit

www.nationalallianceforgrievingchildren.org

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