



The Grieving Child in the Classroom

Children and Grief

What Is Grief?

Grief is our natural human response to the death of someone we love. It's the connection to the person no longer with us.

Grief is a complex process. It's not a single feeling or experience. It's a mixture of many feelings, thoughts and sensations swirling together—in a way that's often confusing for children (and for adults).

Grief is not just the sadness of missing someone. It's a reorganizing of a whole life.

Grief is questions: Who am I now? Where do I fit? Who else will die? Who will take care of me? What is life now? What is *my* life now?

Grief is feeling out of control.

Grief is love, not ever wanting to say goodbye.

Grief Is...

Feelings

- Sadness
- Anger
- Guilt
- Anxiety
- Shock
- Relief

Thoughts

- Disbelief
- Confusion
- Preoccupation
- Sensing the presence of the loved one

Physical Sensations

- Hollowness in the stomach
- Tightness in the chest
- Tightness in the throat
- Oversensitivity to noise
- A sense of depersonalization, as though nothing is real, including yourself
- Breathlessness
- Weakness in the muscles
- Lack of energy
- Dry mouth

Grief Is a Process, Not an Event

The death of someone we love is not an event—it is the first chapter in a lifetime of living without that person. At every age, at every step along the way, we have to figure out how we're going to manage without the one we love so dearly.

Grief is a lifelong process of coming to terms with a major loss in our life.

Grief is a long process. Many children tell us that the second year after their loved one's death is actually more difficult than the first year after the death.

The reality that the one they love is not ever coming back—that this death is *permanent*—takes time to sink in. And when it does, the feelings of loss and bewilderment are often harder than the shock and confusion of the first months after the death.

Even after many years, the death of a parent may impact a child's life. Typical childhood events—from making the soccer team to major milestones like learning to drive, going on a first date or graduating from high school—bring about a longing for the presence of the person who died.

It's important not to assume that a child (or an adult) will "just get over it" after the passage of a certain amount of time. If grief is love not ever wanting to say goodbye, then grief doesn't have a final ending point. Grief changes and sometimes moderates over time, but the journey of grief is a lifetime journey.

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Distractible/Daydreaming

For children and adults alike, very little is clear immediately after a death—and it takes many years to discover the full ramifications of what truly is lost, what is actually left, and what is possible without this loved one.

How do people make these deep discoveries? By going over and over in their mind every aspect of their life—as it was, as it is, as it could have been, as it might be, as it will no longer be...

It's no wonder a grieving child is distractible.

So they stare out the window. They drift off into space. They're distracted easily by movements and sounds in the room. They think about the person they loved—the person they love still—wishing they were still alive, remembering them (the good times and the bad), wondering what their loved one is doing now, wondering how they themselves are going to survive without the one they love...

Forgetful

For the same reasons, a grieving child can be much more forgetful than they used to be.

There is much more than usual going on in a grieving child's mind. It makes sense that some things get pushed to the back burner—or out of the mind entirely.

The child can forget to do their homework. They can forget to turn in completed homework. They can forget that a project is due. They can forget that a form requires a parent's signature. They might forget their pencil, their book or other needed items.

Fearful

A grieving child may have many fears that were not present before their loved one died. In fact, what we see at the Caring Place is that most children are anxious and fearful after the death of a family member.

What we hear from the children most often is the worry, *"Who will die next?"* And right after that is *"And who will take care of me then?"*

Many children become afraid to separate from their parent or parents. They worry that something terrible might happen to their family if they are out of the child's sight. They feel that they want to protect their family.

Grieving children are also often nervous to be in social situations with their peers for fear of being singled out, talked about and/or picked on. Some grieving children prefer to be in the presence of adults they trust rather than in a group of their peers.

Oftentimes, fear is the unseen motivator behind a number of behaviors.

Sudden outbursts of tears

At any time during the day, a grieving child might be reminded about the person who died. Thinking about their loved one can easily cause the child to become tearful or to cry.

Daily life contains many hidden pitfalls for children who have lost a close relative. New friends ask how many siblings are in the family. Other kids complain about their parents. The school sponsors a father and son campout. The loved one's birthday arrives, or the anniversary of their death does. All of these and more may lead a child to feel overwhelmed.

It's important to understand that these "grief attacks" or "grief bursts" are very common to those in grief, adult or child. In addition, there is not always a visible or an understandable trigger to them.

How to Help the Grieving Student During the School Day

Keychains/Photos

A small, unobtrusive way to help a child feel safe as well as feel close to the one they love is to allow the student to keep a picture of their loved one close to them throughout the school day.

A clear plastic photo holder on a keychain can accomplish this. The child can insert a photo (or two) of the person or people that bring them comfort, which can then be kept in their pocket and pulled out when the child needs reassurance.

For younger children, a small stuffed animal or “lovey” that gives them reassurance during difficult emotional times can also be helpful.

Allow phone calls

Grieving children are often preoccupied with the fear that something terrible will happen to their surviving family members.

Allowing the grieving child to make (short) phone calls to their family members, even on a daily basis if needed, can give the child the reassurance they need that their family members are safe, and can help the child continue their day.

Designate a support person for the student

A grieving child may need additional support during the day, when they are overwhelmed with their grief, unable to concentrate, or worried about their surviving family members.

A person with whom the child feels comfortable might be designated as a support for the child. This may be a nurse, a guidance counselor, a teacher's aide or someone else from the school.

The student could then go to this person for support when they need it throughout the day. Support might be talking, simply being present with the student, or giving the student an escape from the pressures of the classroom.



Provide a “grief pass”

Grieving students often feel like they are being watched by teachers and peers to see how they’re adjusting in their grief. They’re also often afraid that they will become overwhelmed by their grief and cry in front of their peers.

To help with this, the grieving child can be given a discreet way to notify the teacher that they need a break from the classroom to deal with their grief.

A way to communicate their need to take a break without drawing attention to themselves could be to choose an object or create a “grief pass” that the student can leave on the corner of their desk and then get up and leave the classroom to go to their designated support person or area without having to ask or explain their behavior.

If children are not permitted to walk the halls alone (or if the child is too young for this), another option could be to have a corner of the room designated as a safe place for the child. Here—perhaps a reading area or a beanbag chair, in semi-privacy if possible—the student could go to take a break, instead of to a separate room.

Maintain consistency, but be flexible

Allowing the child to return to a classroom that still functions on the same expectations and schedule as before is important for the child’s sense of normalcy and stability.

While it’s important that a teacher’s expectations for appropriate behavior do not change, it’s also important to keep in mind that the grieving student might have a shorter attention span and more difficulty concentrating on the task at hand.

Providing extended deadlines for papers and projects, and allowing extended time for testing or providing testing in a quiet area for the student, can make a big difference.

Increase communication with parent(s)

Communication with the parent(s) may need to be increased in order to help the student remember all that is expected. Communication systems for homework (and other things) can be very helpful.

Be sensitive to important dates

Remember that for a grieving child, what used to be special days (holidays, birthdays, anniversaries) may now be especially painful days.

As with everything else, the child’s lead can be followed—if they want to participate (in making Mother’s Day cards, for instance), then they can be encouraged to do so. If it’s too painful, they can be allowed another activity, or be given the chance to go to their support person.

Some days, like the loved one’s birthday, or the anniversary of their death, may simply feel awful all the way through. Being attentive to these dates will at least help in understanding what is going on under the surface.

How to be a supportive person

Teachers especially, as well as other school personnel, don’t need to be afraid to talk to the grieving student about the death they’ve experienced.

Sometimes significant adults mistakenly keep a low profile with children. Teachers are important to students as a source of support for the hours they’re in school. It can be very helpful for a child to know that their teacher is open and willing to listen to their painful feelings, and to their memories of the good times as well.

As much as we’d like to take away the grief our students are feeling, we cannot. Listening, even more than talking, is the most important thing a teacher can do to provide the child with support. When speaking to the child, it’s important to use concrete terms (like “dead” and “died”), and to avoid terms such as “passed away” or “lost,” as these can be confusing to a child.

Preparing Students for the Return of a Grieving Classmate

After a class member has experienced a death, how can a teacher help the class through its own anxiety and uneasiness? And how can the teacher prepare the class to help the returning student?

Discuss grief with the class

After the school has contacted the family and received permission to share about the death with the class, teachers can talk to their students about how grief affects people. The students can be encouraged to share how they feel themselves, perhaps by discussing what other types of losses or deaths the students have experienced, and what helped them cope.

Discuss the difficulties the returning student may have at school

The class might discuss how difficult it may be for their classmate to return to school, and how the student may feel.

The class can be asked for ideas about how they would like others to treat them if they were returning to school after a death. Some students might like to be left alone, while others would want the circumstances discussed freely.

Most grieving students say that they want everyone to treat them the same way that they treated them before. In general, they don't like people being "extra nice." While students usually say they don't want to be in the spotlight, they also don't want people to act like nothing happened.

Discuss ways for the class to reach out to the grieving classmate

Students can reach out by sending cards or pictures to the child and his or her family to let them know the class is thinking of them. If students in the class knew the person who died, they might share memories of that person in the cards.

Other options for providing support include helping the returning classmate with chores or homework. Older teens might offer to help the family with shopping, cleaning or errands, or with babysitting for younger children.

Anticipate some changes in the returning student's behavior

It's important for children to understand that their grieving friend may act differently—they may withdraw from their friends for a while, they might seem angry or very sad, etc.—and that these feelings and behaviors are normal.

Be alert to other children reacting to a friend's loss

Some children in the class may need extra support as well, to help them deal with the sense of frustration and helplessness that they may be feeling, or to help them with their own feelings of loss that might surface if they too have had someone close to them die.

Provide guidance for the students

Many children need help in communicating condolence or comfort messages. Providing the students with age appropriate guidance for supporting their classmate will help them decide what to say.

You may also find some other brochures in this series to be helpful, including:

- *Questions Grieving Teens Ask*
- *Questions Grieving Children Ask*
- *Is There Anything I Can Do? Supporting a Friend Who Is Grieving*

If you know of a family that can benefit from the services of the Highmark Caring Place, we recommend that you talk with an adult in the family about our services and provide them with a brochure and our web address (HighmarkCaringPlace.com), and encourage them to call us. To protect the privacy of the family, our staff does not initiate contact with any family directly.

About the Highmark Caring Place

The Highmark Caring Place is dedicated to making a difference in the lives of grieving children.

It is the mission of the Highmark Caring Place:

- To raise awareness of the needs of grieving children
- To provide programs to address those needs
- To equip the community to support those children who have experienced the death of a loved one



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