

WHAT IS GRIEF?

Grief is the normal, but difficult, response to a loss. Grieving occurs as a child comprehends and accepts the finality of a death, and adapts to the consequences of the loss.

While the death of a family member or friend usually causes the most intense grief, children may grieve other types of losses. Some of these include their parents' divorce or separation, a move or relocation, the ending of a friendship or important relationship, the death of a pet, or experiences of illness or disability. School-age children's coping with loss can be influenced by the responses of their peer group and adults in their educational setting. As a teacher, being informed about children's grief is an important step in supporting them (Shear & Shair, 2005; Zisook & Shear, 2009).

ARE THERE CERTAIN TASKS GRIEVING CHILDREN MUST DO TO WORK THROUGH THEIR GRIEF?

Everyone grieves differently, and there is not one "best" way to grieve. There are some specific challenges, however, that children will need to manage as they gradually accept and adjust to a loss (Goldman, 2000; Baker, Sedney & Gross, 1992). Adults can help them with these challenges.

Understanding

Children must understand what has happened, to the extent allowed by their developmental stage. Children's understanding of death is also influenced by the reactions of family members, family spiritual and cultural beliefs, and history of loss. Even when death is explained in simple language, young children will often repeat the same questions many times as they try to understand. Children of all ages will need many opportunities to ask questions.

Grieving

Children need the chance to feel and express the emotions that accompany a loss. These may include sadness, anger, worry, guilt, relief and many others. Sometimes children will protect their parents from their feelings until they sense that the adults can handle them. Sometimes children are afraid to experience intense feelings and work hard to keep those feelings at arm's length. It is important that children have safe outlets to express their feelings and can grieve freely, but it's also essential that they don't feel pressured to express or focus on feelings that may be overwhelming.

Adjusting to Changes

Children have to adjust to living without the deceased. This is particularly hard when a child loses a family member or close friend because day-to-day life will certainly change. Children may need help in developing new routines, finding new people to provide the things that the deceased did in the past, or understanding the reactions of other people affected by the loss.

Commemorating

Children need ways to continue to remember and feel connected to someone who has died. Privately, a child may find a way to talk to the deceased, or imagine them in a particular location, or carry forward values that were important to the deceased.

Participation in public ceremonies and rituals can also be beneficial to children as they grieve. Rituals can provide children with comfort, a sense of belonging to a larger, caring community, and a way to see how different people express feelings about a loss.

It is often helpful for children to attend funerals, if certain conditions are met in advance. Children should be prepared for what they will see and hear, know that they can express themselves and how others are likely to do so, have a safe adult to talk and sit with, and have a plan for how to exit early if they feel overwhelmed. Other opportunities to memorialize someone include participating in a remembrance service, planting a tree, writing a letter, telling a story, creating a memory box, or simply visiting a special spot that reminds the child of the deceased.

Going On

An important part of grieving is going on with day-to-day living. Adjustment to a loss involves alternating between paying attention to sadness and how much a person is missed, and paying attention to things that are pleasurable and satisfying. It helps to remind children that it is good for them to play, laugh and love again, and that it's what the deceased would have hoped for.

WHAT DOES GRIEF IN CHILDREN LOOK LIKE?

Children definitely experience grief when they are faced with the recent death of a loved one. Yet their grief may be overlooked or misunderstood because it can appear so different from an adult's grief. Grieving children have many of the same feelings as adults, such as sadness, anger, worry and guilt, and at times, their feelings may be as intense. However, children's strong negative feelings do not tend to last as long at any given time. Their distress may come out in reaction to small frustrations, like trouble doing homework, rather than to a reminder of the death. Children may also feel strong positive emotions more quickly after a loss than many adults. As a result, they may appear unconcerned or even callous to people who see them when they are focused on an engaging activity or having fun.

The child's developmental stage, temperament and relationship with the deceased are some of the most significant things that can affect how a loss is felt and expressed. Other factors include how the child learned of the death, whether there were opportunities to say goodbye, the child's experience at a funeral or other ritual, history of loss, mental health status, and other stressors. Children of all ages may worry that since one person has died perhaps others will die too.

How children's grief feels and looks also depends on the recency of the loss. In the beginning, a loss may be extremely painful. As time passes, a child usually feels less pain and does not think about the loss as much. This doesn't mean that the child has stopped caring about the loved one. Instead it shows the child's resiliency and means he or she is coming to terms with the fact that the loved one is gone and cannot return. The child is finding a way to adapt to the changes that result from the loss. As children mature, they become capable of understanding loss in different ways. They must also manage the new ways the loss impacts their ever-changing lives. They may have to repeat the process of adapting to and coming to terms with the loss again and again. Thus, grief is not something that is ever really "completed."

HOW DO CHILDREN AT DIFFERENT DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES UNDERSTAND DEATH? HOW DO THEY GRIEVE?

Children are old enough to grieve a loss if they are old enough to experience attachment.

Preschool

Very young children are beginning to understand the world outside of themselves, but their cognitive, emotional and language skills are still developing. They think in concrete ways and can be confused by some common explanations of death. For example, a five-year-old who was told that his father had gone “to live in Heaven, up in the sky,” expressed his wish to become a pilot so that he could visit him. Another preschool-age child was told that “just the body” gets buried in a cemetery because the spirit goes to Heaven. She asked later, “What happens to the heads?”

Preschoolers’ belief that their own wishes and thoughts can make things happen in the world may cause them to worry that a death is their fault. Adults need to listen for those kinds of worries and reassure children that no one’s thoughts caused the death. Young children may also struggle to understand the idea of someone being gone “forever” and may ask when the deceased will come back. They may ask the same questions over again as they seek to understand what has happened. Simple and repeated explanations are what they need to hear. Preschoolers may also have trouble sustaining their newest accomplishments, like using the toilet, separating easily from a parent in the morning, or using words, not hands, to deal with conflicts.

Elementary School

Children in elementary school tend to think about things in concrete, literal ways, and it can be difficult for them to understand abstract concepts or euphemisms such as “taken by the angels,” or “moved on.” They, too, are helped by hearing simple explanations of what happened and why, and by being given the chance to ask whatever questions they want. Sometimes questions from this age group sound insensitive, even gory; for example, children may wonder about what happens to a body after death. Usually these questions show that they are trying to make sense of what happened by “getting the story straight.” Even at this age, children sometimes worry that they did something to cause a death so it is helpful for adults to check in and ask them, “What do you think happened?”

Elementary school-age children may feel a wide range of emotions, including sadness, worry about other loved ones, anger that the loss feels so unfair, and sometimes relief and guilt. Like all grieving children, they will need extra support and love as well as a sense that life is returning to normal as much as possible. Staying busy is one of the most common ways elementary-age children manage their difficult feelings so giving them a lot of opportunities for physical and creative activities is helpful. Adults can also help children find comfortable settings in which to express their feelings and reassure them that their feelings will get easier with time. Peer groups, like a “lunch bunch,” can be helpful as can identifying a safe adult at school that the child can go to for support. Because children often experience feelings physically – like getting frequent headaches or stomachaches – the school nurse is an important member of the support team.

Middle School (Early Adolescence)

Middle school is a time of great emotional, cognitive, spiritual and physical growth for children. Typically they are quite mature in some areas but immature in others. Since children develop at such different rates, there can be a lot of variation in how grief is expressed in early adolescence. Middle school children understand that death is final and may feel overwhelmed by strong and often conflicting emotional reactions. They may be fearful about showing strong emotions in front of peers and of being treated differently after a loss. Because children at this age want to feel more independent, the natural dependence that grief reactions can precipitate can be hard to handle. Although they may want support from adults, they may worry about being seen as “childish.” At school, they should be able to seek adults for support in a private and confidential way.

Middle school-age children are well-known for being influenced by – and wanting to fit in with – their peers. They may feel isolated from non-grieving peers, or worry that their way of grieving is “wrong.” Participating in a support group with other grieving middle school children can be very helpful.

High School (Adolescence)

Adolescents in high school may struggle with many of the same concerns as middle school students, but with increased pressure to appear independent and in control. Their responses can sometimes look like those of a middle-schooler, and other times seem very adult. Under stress, teenagers may be able to sound mature (i.e. “talk the talk”) but behave in ways that are selfish or insensitive (i.e. not “walk the walk”). Adolescents’ growing ability to consider abstract ideas may allow them to grapple for the first time with questions about justice, spirituality, the meaning of suffering and the purpose of life. They may struggle to handle the intense and powerful emotions associated with grief and may have more difficulty distracting themselves from these feelings than younger children do. Extreme feelings of sadness, loneliness and anger are common reactions for this age group. Adults can help by talking honestly about their own grief responses and what works to manage them.

Teens in this age group continue to be self-conscious and concerned about how their peers view them. They can be vehement about not wanting to be pitied. They may withdraw from their family members as they seek support from people outside of the family. A positive peer group should be respected, bolstered and supported. Adolescent grief groups are ideal for those willing to attend, as the young person may also feel isolated from non-grieving peers. Since a loss can impact how adolescents weigh upcoming life decisions – such as going away to college – it is important for adults to be open to talking frankly about the practical effects of a loss without making the adolescent feel selfish for wondering.

Teens sometimes engage in risky or dangerous behavior as they struggle with the developmentally incongruent reality that death can occur to those they love. Risky behavior may be a way to seek help without having to ask directly for it and should be addressed quickly.

WHAT ARE SOME GRIEF REACTIONS IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS?

Behavioral	Emotional	Physical	Cognitive	Spiritual
Crying	Sadness	Weight gain/loss	Shock/disbelief	Questioning God or spiritual faith
Changes in sleep patterns	Anger	Headaches	Hypervigilance	Searching for meaning of life
Loss of appetite/ change in appetite	Guilt	Stomachaches	Nightmares	Anger at organized religion/God
Change in school performance	Anxiety, fear, panic	Fatigue, exhaustion	Difficulty concentrating	Feeling loss of purpose
Withdrawal	Sense of responsibility	Gastrointestinal symptoms	Loss of focus/ short attention span	Fear of religion/ God
Risky behaviors	Loneliness	Chest pains	Confusion	Re-purposing life
Avoiding reminders of the person or the loss event	Feeling abandoned	Shortness of breath	Preoccupation	Depression
Irritability/ agitation	Feeling shut down	Changes in blood pressure	Worry	
Clinginess	Numbness	Dizziness/fainting/ light-headedness	Obsessive thoughts about the deceased or dying	
	Relief	Numbness	Heightened/ lowered alertness	
	Dramatic emotional swings	Unexplained pains/aches	Disorientation	
		Nausea	Daydreams	
			Sense of visitations/ conversations with the deceased	
			Trouble with memory	

WHAT ARE SIGNS THAT A CHILD MAY NEED ADDITIONAL SUPPORT?

Although extremely painful at the beginning, grief usually gets easier with time. Grief does not automatically lead to depression. If there is concern that a child is depressed, it is important to seek help for the child and not simply assume that time will make things better. Similarly, grief may contribute to whatever problems a child exhibits, but may not be the only, or even primary, cause. Teachers can help children by continuing to think broadly about what may affect their functioning—for example, considering the possibility of an undiagnosed learning disability in regards to a child’s classroom performance.

Red flags indicating a child may need more support include:

- A persistent change or difficulties in the child’s functioning in two or more arenas (home, school or with peers)
- Any self-harm, increased risk-taking or substance abuse
- Any symptoms that interfere significantly with the child’s usual functioning for more than a few weeks

WHAT CAN I SAY TO A GRIEVING CHILD?

- “I am so sorry that your father died.”
- “I will be right here to listen no matter what you are feeling.”
- “Tell me what we can do to help you feel supported in class.”
- “Who can you talk to about this?” (Ask about both adults and other children.)
- “I really care about you.”
- “Would you like to talk to other kids who have gone through a loss?”
- “It’s really hard to believe right now, but this won’t always feel so, so hard.”

HOW CAN I SUPPORT A GRIEVING CHILD?

- Acknowledge their loss honestly.
- Provide unconditional love and support.
- Maintain normal routines as much as possible.
- Identify non-death losses as well as death losses.
- Allow ample time for grief responses.
- Accept that children may *not* want to talk about grief.
- Anticipate anniversary reactions and long-term expressions of grief.
- Ask children what they would like to do on holidays like Christmas, Mother’s Day, and Father’s Day.
- Reflect feelings without judgment.
- Allow them to express their feelings, including the ones that may be harder to understand such as guilt, relief and anger.
- Stay present with the child for an extended period of time.
- Create opportunities for peer support while recognizing some children’s wish for privacy.
- Assess for signs of depression, suicide, post-traumatic stress, or difficulty coping.
- Seek out play therapy, art therapy, and/or expressive therapies.
- Recommend counseling and supportive services, including children’s grief groups.
- Consider the child’s overall web of support: family, friends, teachers, clergy, coaches and professionals.

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP IF A CLASSMATE DIES?

- Acknowledge the child who has died.
- Provide children honest information about what happened.
- Create time in the classroom to talk about the child who died.
- Model appropriate grieving responses, i.e. professionals can acknowledge that they, too, are sad, scared, angry or shocked.
- Talk about what normal grief looks like and how it's different for everyone.
- Empower children to identify safe adults in their world.
- Work with children to write letters and create art to be presented to the family of the child in a ceremony.
- Discuss other losses.
- Have a grief professional facilitate a discussion about the feelings children are experiencing.
- Memorialize the child through pictures, stories and leaving their desk unoccupied.

WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO TO HELP GRIEVING CHILDREN?

- Identify safe adults such as school social workers/counselors who have training in children's grief that children/adolescents can talk with. Be very specific about who these adults are, and create socially safe ways for children to access the counselor. For example, the social worker could meet with every child once, or with everyone in a group, not just the children who are "identified." This reduces the stigma of grief.
- Start a children's grief group in the school for children who have experienced any loss. Sometimes a local non-profit agency or hospice will lend staff to run such a group if the school does not have adequate personnel.
- Teach about loss/illness as a normal part of life through the use of books that discuss loss, during teaching about science and the life cycle, and in the stories that are used in the classroom to illustrate other skills. However, be sensitive to the ways such discussions are affecting any children who have experienced a loss.
- Prepare classmates for the return of an ill or bereaved classmate by letting them ask questions of a professional—either a teacher, nurse or social worker—before the child returns to the class. Also try to learn about and respect the bereaved child's wishes regarding how much, and when to talk about the situation.
- Talk about death/dying whenever the opportunity arises.
- Have an emergency crisis plan for small and large incidents that everyone in the school understands. Sometimes this requires enlisting support from other professionals in the community if the school personnel are also grieving.
- Allow school personnel to model normal grieving responses by showing their emotions and naming them.
- Create educational opportunities for personnel to learn about childhood grief at the beginning of the school year and during educational development days.
- Use art/creative writing to allow children to express loss reactions. Children can make memory boxes, write letters to family members of the deceased, and create pictures/memories of their friend, classmate or family member.
- Allow children to write letters, cards, etc., to a grieving classmate or family.
- Create memorial awards or scholarships in honor of deceased.
- Enlist children's ideas of ways to remember and honor the deceased, individually and as a school.
- Train personnel to identify signs of depression and suicide.
- Help the child cope with the resurgence of pain, particularly likely around anniversaries and his or her developmental milestones.

WHAT CAN A TEACHER DO TO HELP A GRIEVING CHILD IN THE CLASSROOM?

- Work with the parent, child and school counselor to identify a safe place the child can go to when feeling overwhelmed in class (i.e. the counselor's office, library, another favorite teacher). Many children develop a signal with their teacher to notify him or her when they need to go to their safe place. This may be a note or subtle gesture.
- Be aware of the child's level of comfort in sharing information with the class. Many children feel very supported by class cards while others are extremely uncomfortable with everyone knowing about their loss or with it being brought up to the entire class in front of them. Also understand that a child's preference for this may change.
- Take note if the child is struggling to answer questions that peers may ask about the loss. Reassure him or her that it is okay to tell friends, "I don't want to talk about it today," and remind the child of who they can talk to if they need to.
- Maintain classroom routines and expectations. Many bereaved children feel further stigmatized when they are not held to the same expectations as their peers in turning in assignments and finishing projects. Some may need the extra time or support but still need limits and deadlines.
- Realize that some children may not acknowledge the loss at all while they are at school, making it their safe place of routine and regularity. Share these observations with the parent or school counselor.
- Create ritual within the classroom for all kinds of losses: This could look like a class worry jar that the children add to when they need to get rid of a worry at the beginning of class; a paper tree with paper leaves where children could write down major changes in their lives when they occur, just as the leaves change in nature; a rock garden where children could write things that they miss on the rocks; or a problem-solving time when the group could help identify good things to do when feeling sad or mad like journaling, exercising, talking, playing, etc.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

<http://www.dougy.org/>

<http://www.nationalallianceforgrievingchildren.org/>

<http://www.nationalallianceforgrievingchildren.org/classroom-activities-time-crisis>

<http://www.education.com/reference/article/cultural-approaches-support-grief/>

<http://www.rainbowhospice.org/bereavement/school.asp>

<http://www.childrensgrief.net/>

<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/journals/262/critical-incidents-in-schools.htm>

<http://aacap.org/page.wv?name = Children + and + Grief§ion = Facts + for + Families>

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