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# CRISIS: HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH GRIEF AND LOSS



NATIONAL  
ASSOCIATION OF  
SCHOOL  
PSYCHOLOGISTS

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Everyone is affected when a death or tragedy occurs within a school community. The effects can be significant, whether it is the loss of a student, parent of a student, or staff member. Even highly traumatic or violent deaths, like those we have witnessed in recent years, such as 9/11, can have a strong impact. How school personnel handle the crisis can help shape the immediate and longer term grieving process for students, staff, and families. Children, in particular, need the love and support of their teachers and parents in order to cope with loss and to reach constructive grief resolution.

## Expressions of Grief

Talking to children about death must be geared to their developmental level and their capacity to understand the facts of the situation. Children will be aware of the reactions of significant adults as they interpret and react to information about death and tragedy. The range of reactions that children display in response to death may include:

- *Emotional shock:* This may appear as an apparent lack of feelings, which serves to help the child detach from the pain of the moment.
- *Regressive (immature) behaviors:* These behaviors include needing to be rocked or held, difficulty separating from parents or significant others, needing to sleep in a parent's bed, or an apparent difficulty completing tasks well within the child's ability level.
- *Explosive emotions and acting-out behavior:* These may 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 repeatedly:* This may be because the information is so hard to believe or accept and not that the child does not understand the facts. Repeated questions can help us determine if the child is responding to misinformation or to the real trauma of the event.

## Helping Children Cope

The following tips will help teachers and parents 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, CO.

- *Allow children to be the teachers about their grief experiences:* Give children the opportunity to tell their stories and be good listeners.
- *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.
- *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.
- *Don't lie or tell half truths to children about the tragic event:* Children are often bright and sensitive. They will see through false information and wonder why we do not trust them with the truth. Lies do not help the child through the healing process or help develop effective coping strategies for life's future tragedies or losses.
- *Help all children, regardless of age, to understand loss and death:* Give children information at the level that they can understand. Allow children to guide adults as to the need for more information or

clarification of the information presented. Loss and death are both part of the cycle of life that children need to understand.

- *Encourage children to ask questions about loss and death:* Adults need to be less anxious about not knowing all the answers. Treat questions with respect and a willingness to help children find their own answers.
- *Don't assume that children always grieve in an orderly or predictable way:* We all grieve in different ways and there is no one correct way for people to move through the grieving process.
- *Let children know that you really want to understand what they are feeling or what they need:* Sometimes children are upset but they cannot tell us what will be helpful. Giving them the time and encouragement to share their feelings with us may enable them to sort out their feelings.
- *Children will need long-lasting support:* The more losses the child or adolescent has suffered, the more difficult it will be to recover. This is especially true if the child has lost a parent who was the major source of support. Try to develop multiple supports for children who suffered significant losses.
- *Understand that grief work is hard and complicated:* When death results from a terrorist act, this brings out many issues that are difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend. Grieving may be complicated by a need for vengeance or justice and by the lack of resolution of the situation. The often sudden nature of death, as well as when many individuals are considered missing rather than dead, further complicates the already difficult grieving process.
- *Be aware of your own need to grieve:* Focusing on the children in our care is important, but not at the expense of our emotional needs. Adults who have lost a loved one will be far more able to help children work through their grief if they get help themselves. For some families, it may be important to seek family grief counseling, as well as individual sources of support.

## Developmental Phases in Understanding Death

All children are unique in their understanding of death and dying. This understanding depends on their developmental level, cognitive skills, personality characteristics, religious or spiritual beliefs, teachings by parents and significant others, input from the media, and experiences with death. Nonetheless, there are some general considerations that will be helpful in

understanding how children and adolescents experience and deal with death.

- *Infants and toddlers:* The youngest children may perceive that adults are sad, but have no real understanding of the meaning or significance of death.
- *Preschoolers:* Young children may deny death as a formal event and may see death as reversible. They may interpret death as a separation, not a permanent condition. Preschool and even early elementary children may link certain events and magical thinking with the causes of death. For instance, as a result of the 9/11 World Trade Center tragedy, some children may have imagined that going into tall buildings could cause someone's death.
- *Early elementary school:* Children at this age (approximately age 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. 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, and 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 9/11 disaster. 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. Here are some suggestions teachers and parents can provide to children and youth to deal with this secondary loss:

- Help clarify understanding death, particularly with younger children.
- Reassure children that their own families are safe. Seeing their classmates' reactions to loss may bring about some fears of losing their own parents or siblings. 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.
- Provide children with age-appropriate guidance for supporting their peers. Children and many adults need help in communicating condolence or comfort messages. Help them decide what to say ("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.
- 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, or might seem angry or very sad, but that this does not mean a lasting change in their relationship.
- Explain to children that their 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 normality.
- Provide concrete actions children may take to help them deal with their fears and concerns. Children need to have some options for providing support. Suggest making cards, drawings, or helping with chores or homework. Older teens might offer to help the family with some shopping, cleaning, errands, or with babysitting for younger children.
- Encourage children who are worried about a friend to talk to a caring adult. This can help alleviate their own concerns or potential sense of responsibility for making their friend feel better. Children may also share important information about a friend who is at risk of more serious grief reactions.

## Summary

At times of severe stress, such as the trauma of a natural disaster or the terrorist attacks on our country, both children and adults need extra support. Parents and teachers need to be alert to children in their care who may be reacting to a friend's loss of a loved one. These children will need some extra support to help them deal with the sense of frustration and helplessness that many people are feeling at this time. Children closest to a tragedy may very well experience the most dramatic feelings of fear, anxiety, and loss. They may have personally lost a loved one or know of friends and schoolmates who have been devastated by a loss. Adults need to carefully observe these children for signs of traumatic stress, depression, or even suicidal thinking, and seek professional help when necessary.

## Resources

### Grieving and Traumatized Children

- Gootman, M. E. (1994). *When a friend dies: A book for teens about grieving and healing*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit. ISBN: 0915793660.
- Greenlee, S. (1992). *When someone dies*. Atlanta: Peachtree. ISBN: 1561450448. (For ages 9–12.)
- Wofelt, A. (2001). *Healing your grieving heart for kids*. Ft. Collins, CO: Companion. ISBN: 1879651270.

### Caregivers

- Deaton, R. L., & Berkan, W.A. (1995). *Planning and managing death issues in the schools: A handbook*. Westport, CT: Greenwood. ISBN: 0313295255.
- Webb, N. B. (1993). *Helping bereaved children: A handbook for practitioners*. New York: Guilford. ASIN: 0898621305.
- Wofelt, A. (1983). *Helping children cope with grief*. Bristol, PA: Accelerated Development. ISBN: 0915202395.
- Wofelt, A. (1997). *Healing the bereaved child: Grief gardening, growth through grief and other touchstones for caregivers*. Ft. Collins, CO: Companion. ISBN: 1879651106.
- Worden, J. W. (1996). *Children and grief: When a parent dies*. New York: Guilford. ISBN: 1572307463.

### Websites

- National Association of School Psychologists—[www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org).  
Resources to help identify symptoms of severe stress and grief reactions.
- Mister Rogers Website—[www.misterrogers.org](http://www.misterrogers.org)  
See booklet, *Grieving for Children*, for ages 4–10.

*This handout is adapted from an earlier version posted on the National Association of School Psychologists website in September 2001. Scott Poland, EdD, NCSP, is Director of Psychological Services for the Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District in Houston, TX, and is a member of NASP's National Emergency Assistance Team. Katherine C. Cowan is Director of Marketing and Communications for NASP. Ted Feinberg, EdD, NCSP, is the Assistant Executive Director at NASP and is a member of NASP's National Emergency Assistance Team.*

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The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) offers a wide variety of free or low cost online resources to parents, teachers, and others working with children and youth through the NASP website [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)

and the NASP Center for Children & Families website [www.naspcenter.org](http://www.naspcenter.org). Or use the direct links below to access information that can help you improve outcomes for the children and youth in your care.

**About School Psychology**—Downloadable brochures, FAQs, and facts about training, practice, and career choices for the profession.

[www.nasponline.org/about\\_nasp/spsych.html](http://www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/spsych.html)

**Crisis Resources**—Handouts, fact sheets, and links regarding crisis prevention/intervention, coping with trauma, suicide prevention, and school safety.

[www.nasponline.org/crisisresources](http://www.nasponline.org/crisisresources)

**Culturally Competent Practice**—Materials and resources promoting culturally competent assessment and intervention, minority recruitment, and issues related to cultural diversity and tolerance.

[www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence](http://www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence)

**En Español**—Parent handouts and materials translated into Spanish. [www.naspcenter.org/espanol/](http://www.naspcenter.org/espanol/)

**IDEA Information**—Information, resources, and advocacy tools regarding IDEA policy and practical implementation.

[www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAinformation.html](http://www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAinformation.html)

**Information for Educators**—Handouts, articles, and other resources on a variety of topics.

[www.naspcenter.org/teachers/teachers.html](http://www.naspcenter.org/teachers/teachers.html)

**Information for Parents**—Handouts and other resources a variety of topics.

[www.naspcenter.org/parents/parents.html](http://www.naspcenter.org/parents/parents.html)

**Links to State Associations**—Easy access to state association websites.

[www.nasponline.org/information/links\\_state\\_orgs.html](http://www.nasponline.org/information/links_state_orgs.html)

**NASP Books & Publications Store**—Review tables of contents and chapters of NASP bestsellers.

[www.nasponline.org/bestsellers](http://www.nasponline.org/bestsellers)

Order online. [www.nasponline.org/store](http://www.nasponline.org/store)

**Position Papers**—Official NASP policy positions on key issues.

[www.nasponline.org/information/position\\_paper.html](http://www.nasponline.org/information/position_paper.html)

**Success in School/Skills for Life**—Parent handouts that can be posted on your school's website.

[www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit](http://www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit)