

Resources for Helping Children with Grief

Distinguishing Between Normal and Abnormal Grief In Children

At the beginning of the grief process, it is very difficult to distinguish between normal and abnormal grief behavior. Usually, abnormal grief is demonstrated by extreme behavior. The following table includes typical normal and abnormal grief behaviors.

Normal	Abnormal
√Responds to comfort and support.	√Rejects support.
√Uses play to work out feelings of grief.	√Resistant to use of play.
√Often open and angry.	√Complains and is irritable. May not directly express anger.
√Connects depressed feelings with death.	√Does not relate feelings to life events.
√Can still experience moments of joy.	√Projects a pervasive sense of doom.
√Caring adults can sense a feeling of chronic sadness and emptiness.	√Projects hopelessness and emptiness.
√May express guilt over some aspect of the loss.	√Has overwhelming feelings of guilt.
√Self-esteem temporarily impacted.	√Deep loss of self-esteem.

If it has been determined that a child could benefit from counseling, the child should be told so with compassion and understanding. The last thing children need to feel is that something is wrong with them. It may be appropriate to explain to a child that just as there are doctors to help with broken bones, there are caring people who can help in dealing with grief.

Considerations with teenage children (ages 12 - 18)

Because of the sorrow of losing a friend, coupled with realizing that they are not immortal, teenagers' inner security systems may become shattered when confronted with the death of a friend or loved one. As part of their coping process, teenagers may exhibit the following:

Escape by engaging in drugs, sex, etc. Decrease of normal inhibitions and increased risk taking. Hyper aggressiveness. Defiance. Anger at parents or the person who died. Suicidal thoughts. Fear of close relationships. Low self-esteem Guilt. Difficulty with long-term plans. Short attention span. Decline in school work.

These behaviors, if prolonged, may need professional attention. Students need to know, however, that it is normal to feel troubled after experiencing the loss of a loved one. They should be encouraged to find someone to help them through their feelings.

When helping a teenager deal with the death of someone close, it is important for the school

staff to understand the following: There is little difference in the way teenagers and adults understand death.

Teenagers need to know that what they are feeling (numbness, sadness, guilt, anger) is normal. Therefore, what they are feeling is okay.

Teenagers need to know that it is okay to express fear, sadness and love. They need to be free to talk if they so desire.

Many teenagers act out and verbalize their feelings.

Teenage years are a time when teens are trying to form their own identity. To accomplish this, they need to have a security system that reassures them that life is basically safe. When they experience a death close to them, their security system is shattered. This makes it more difficult for teenagers to establish their own identity away from their families, making teenage grieving unique when compared to other age groups.

Dealing with grief is a major undertaking. So is being a teenager.

Helping Students Deal with Grief

In this Education Week article, Evie Blad reports that experts believe many schools are not adequately supporting grieving students. “For some reason with bereavement, it’s not a mental illness and it’s not something you diagnose, so it’s not something that you treat,” says pediatrician David Schonfeld. Grief tends to be seen as a normal part of life that doesn’t warrant clinical attention. Teachers and administrators can also feel awkward dealing with a grief-stricken student. “They don’t know what to do, but also, it’s painful to watch a kid grieve,” says Schonfeld. “They’re afraid to get too close or to start something they don’t think they can finish.” (One simple step is teachers coordinating to make sure a student returning to school isn’t confronted with a pile of homework and tests to make up.)

One in 20 American children will lose a parent by the time they are 16, and the vast majority will experience the loss of a family member or friend by the time they finish high school. Students in high-crime areas may experience two or more traumas, resulting in cumulative distress. Grief can result in excessive absenteeism and difficulty focusing in class – reading the same words over and over without understanding – and may cause students to have

difficulty connecting with peers and adults. Some teenagers engage in risk-taking behaviors

like drugs and violence to prove to themselves that they will survive.

To help schools do a better job supporting stricken youth, the Coalition to Support Grieving Students has launched a website, www.grievingstudents.org, with professional-development modules and suggestions for classroom discussions, easing students' re-entry, funeral attendance, and the psychology of child grief. Here are some of the Coalition's pointers on what educators should and should not say:

- **Don't say**, "I know just what you're going through." You can't know this; everyone's grief is unique.
- Say instead: "Can you tell me more about what this has been like for you?"
- **Don't say**, "You must be incredibly angry." It's not helpful to tell people how they are feeling or ought to feel; they may feel many different things at different times.
- Say instead: "Most people have strong feelings when something like this happens to them. What has this been like for you?"
- **Don't say**, "At least he's no longer in pain." Trying to focus on positive news may backfire or prevent a student from being appropriately in touch with feelings of grief.
- Say instead: "What sorts of things have you been thinking about since your loved one died?"
- **Don't say**, "I lost both my parents when I was your age." Comparing one's own losses to students' may leave them feeling their loss is not as profound or important.
- Say instead: "Tell me more about what this has been like for you."

"Educators Tend to Overlook Student Grief, Experts Say" by Evie Blad in Education Week, January 21, 2015 (Vol. 34, #18, p. 1, 12-13), www.edweek.org