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# DEATH AND GRIEF IN THE FAMILY: PROVIDING SUPPORT AT SCHOOL

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One of every seven children loses a parent to death before the age of 10. Many more will experience the death of a sibling, grandparent, or a school-age friend. Teachers are in a unique position to assist grieving children; however, preparation to meet this need is not typically provided in preservice or inservice training.

Reid and Dixon (1999) found that a majority of educators felt “minimally prepared” or “completely unprepared” to deal with death or dying in a classroom. Only 18% of the teachers surveyed believed their training was adequate. Yet, teachers can play a vital role in helping children understand and manage the pain of grief. This handout provides an overview of the information and strategies that teachers can use to support grieving children in their classrooms.

## Children’s Understanding of Death

**Preschool (age 2–6).** Generally around age 4 children have a limited and vague understanding of death. Children of this age generally do not think of death as permanent. They may believe it is reversible and talk of doing things with the person in the future. Preschoolers frequently engage in magical thought and play. They may believe if they pray or wish hard enough, they can bring the dead person to life. A teacher may overhear a child tell a friend, “My mommy is not dead. She is visiting Grandma.” Young children may connect events or things together that do not belong together. A child may tell his brother he hates him, and a short time later the brother is struck and killed by a car. The child may not only have guilt for what he said, but feel responsible for *causing* the death. As teachers and caregivers, we must disconnect these events in children’s thinking by reassuring them that the events are not in any way related.

**Primary grade (age 6–9).** Children at this age have begun to grasp the finality of death, but very often they still engage in magical thinking and maintain the belief that their thoughts and wishes may have the power to undo death. This belief in their power may lead to the idea that they could have prevented the death or they should have been there to protect the person who died. This thinking also is likely to lead to feelings of guilt and responsibility for the person’s death.

**Intermediate grade (age 9–12).** Developmentally, at this age, children are reading adventure books, telling ghost stories, and becoming preoccupied with super heroes. They often look on death as some supernatural being that comes and gets you. Even though they think of death as something that happens primarily to old people, they realize it can happen to the young, to their parents, to their loved ones. At this age they may develop fears of their parents dying or have nightmares about the death of a friend or loved one. They may also think people die because of some wrongdoing of the dead person or someone around them; that is, death is punishment for bad behavior. Again, this type of thinking can lead to feelings of guilt and remorse.

**Middle and high school (age 12–18).** By the time children reach middle school, they probably understand death as well as adults. They understand it is permanent and it happens to everyone eventually. They spend much of their time thinking, daydreaming, and philosophizing about death. They are often fascinated with death and fantasize about their own death to the dismay of their parents. They imagine their own funeral, for example: who will come, how badly people will feel, and how people will wish they had been nicer to them when they were alive. Even with this preoccupation with death, they can feel immune to it and engage in death-challenging behaviors such as reckless driving, drinking, or taking drugs.

## Tips for Teachers and Other School Personnel

- Get as much information as possible from the family and ask to share it with the class. Ask the family if they have any objections to students attending the funeral.
- Tell the affected classes before the rest of the student body. Tell the class the truth about what happened. Don't go into too much detail. Give the class information about the family's wishes as they relate to visitation and the funeral. Also keep in mind that cultural and religious practices can vary greatly across the families in the school community and that these differences may need some explanation. For example, for some families it is customary to hold a wake, sit shiva, or hold a ceremony that may be very unfamiliar to most students.
- Allow time for the students to share their feelings. Ask them how the bereaved child may be feeling now. They can draw a picture or write a paragraph about what they think their bereaved classmate feels. Ask for volunteers to read their paragraphs or share their pictures.
- Have students write phrases on the chalkboard that may help them recognize that their feelings are reasonable.
- Allow students to do things for the bereaved classmate. It can mean a lot to both the class and the student. Notes, cards, letters, or pictures can be sent to the child at home or given to the child when he or she returns to school. School personnel should always screen these projects before delivery.
- Help students who plan to attend the funeral or memorial service prepare for the experience if attending the funeral or service is an option. For many, it will be the first time they have attended such an event, and they may be unsure of how to act or what to say.
- Guide the class in what to say and how to act when the bereaved student returns to school. There are two messages that they will want to convey to their classmate: "We missed you, and we are glad you are back" and "We are really sorry about the death of your \_\_\_\_\_." Not every student in the class needs to speak to the bereaved student, but hearing that he or she was missed and thought about is helpful in a time of grief. It may be necessary to tell selected students that it is a completely out-of-bounds topic for teasing.
- Do not view the deaths of non-primary family members and pets as being insignificant. These

provide teachable moments about death. The school can play an important role by offering support, structure, and companionship when the family may be in distress.

## Common Emotional and Cognitive Characteristics of Grief

School personnel should be alert to common grief reactions in children. The American Hospice Foundation (Fitzgerald, 2001) has put together an excellent training guide for school personnel and ideas for a classroom curriculum, including tips for managing these typical changes in performance:

- *Forgetfulness*: Help the bereaved child establish routines or develop a schedule. Remind the child to write down assignments and other important things.
- *Disorganization*: It may take a grieving child much longer to complete a task or find an assignment. Be patient.
- *Inability to concentrate*: Don't be surprised to see the child daydreaming. It may be hard for the child to focus.
- *Inability to retain information*: Help the child by encouraging the use of study aids (e.g., outlining material, highlighting important facts, breaking study sessions into shorter segments).
- *Lack of motivation*: The child may be thinking about what has happened and not about school work. After-school tutoring may be necessary if the quality of work is seriously diminished for an extended period.
- *Lowered tolerance level and increased impatience*: A grieving child may be short tempered, irritable, or impatient. Warn the child and his or her peers that taking out one's problems on others is not the best way to handle things. Offer problem-solving strategies to help the child cope appropriately.

## Identification of High-Risk Students

Observations of the following high-risk behaviors should be shared with the parents and a mental health service provider, such as a school psychologist, counselor, or social worker:

- Talking or writing about wanting to die
- Drop in grades for an extended period (more than 3 weeks)
- Development and persistence of physical symptoms following the death (e.g., dizziness, headaches, lack of appetite, gastrointestinal problems)
- Depression that lasts for more than 2 weeks

- Guilt and expressing responsibility for the death of the loved one
- Isolation and lack of communication with peers and adults

## Resources

- Fitzgerald, H. (2001). *Grief at school: A training guide*. Washington, DC: American Hospice Foundation. Available: [www.americanhospice.org](http://www.americanhospice.org)
- Reid, J. K., & Dixon, W. A. (1999). Teacher attitudes on coping with grief in the public school classroom. *Psychology in the Schools*, 36, 219–229.
- Wolfelt, A. (2001). *Healing your grieving heart for kids*. Ft. Collins, CO: Companion. ISBN: 1879651270. (See related titles by this author for teens and adults.)
- Wolfelt, A. (2002). Children's grief. In S. E. Brock, P. J. Lazarus, & S. R. Jimerson (Eds.), *Best practices in school crisis prevention and intervention*. (pp. 653–674). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists. ISBN: 0-932955-84-3.

## Websites and Organizations

- America Hospice Foundation: 2110 L Street, NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20037; [www.americanhospice.org](http://www.americanhospice.org)
- Compassionate Friends: P.O. Box 3696, Oak Brook, IL 60522; [www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org)
- Griefnet: P.O. Box 3272, Ann Arbor, MI 48106; [www.griefnet.org](http://www.griefnet.org) (excellent area for children)
- National Association of School Psychologists: 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814; [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)
- The Warm Place: 809 Lipscomb Street, Ft. Worth, TX 76104; [www.thewarmplace.org](http://www.thewarmplace.org)

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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)

