



Death and Grief: Supporting Children & Youth Tips for Children & Teens with Grieving Friends & Classmates

Adapted from "Death and Grief in the Family: Tips for Parents" in Helping Children at Home and School III, NASP, 2010 and from materials posted on the NASP website after September 11, 2001.

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. Below are suggestions teachers and parents can provide to children and youth to deal with this "secondary" loss:

- Provide children with age-appropriate guidance for supporting their peers. Help them decide what to say (e.g. "Steve, I am so sorry about your father. I know you will miss him very much).
- 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, etc., but that this does not mean a lasting change in their relationship. Explain to children that their "regular" 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 going on a trip to the mall may offer a much needed distraction and sense of connection and normalcy.
- Children need to have some options for providing support - it will help them deal with their fears and concerns if they have some concrete actions that they can take to help. Suggest making cards, drawings, helping with chores or homework, etc. Older teens might offer to help the family with some shopping, cleaning, errands, etc., 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 concern or potential sense of responsibility for helping their friend feel better.
- Children may also share important information about a friend who is at risk of more serious grief reactions. 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.

Please refer to a school clinician or outside counseling if you observe the following:

- Severe loss of interest in daily activities (e.g. extracurricular activities and friends)
- Disruption in ability to eat or sleep
- School refusal
- Fear of being alone
- Wish to join the deceased
- Severe drop in school achievement
- Suicidal references or behavior

Supporting Grieving Children and Youth

How adults in a family or school community grieve following a loss will influence how children and youth grieve. When adults are able to talk about the loss, express their feelings, and provide support for children and youth in the aftermath of a loss, they are better able to develop healthy coping strategies.

Adults are encouraged to:

- Talk about the loss. This gives children permission to talk about it too.
- Ask questions to determine how children understand the loss, and gauge their physical and emotional reactions.
- Listen patiently. Remember that each person is unique and will grieve in her or his own way.
- Be prepared to discuss the loss repeatedly. Children should be encouraged to talk about, act out, or express through writing or art the details of the loss, as well as their feelings about the event, the deceased person, and about other changes that have occurred in their lives as a result of the loss.
- Give children important facts about the event at an appropriate developmental level. This may include helping children accurately understand what death is. For younger children, this explanation might include helping them to understand that the person's body has stopped working and will never again work.

- Help children understand the death and intervene to correct false perceptions about the cause of the event, ensuring that they do not blame themselves or others for the situation.
- Provide a model of healthy mourning by being open about your own feelings of sadness and grief.
- Create structure and routine for children so they experience predictability and stability.
- Take care of yourself so you can assist the children and adolescents in your care. Prolonged, intense grieving or unhealthy grief reactions (such as substance abuse) will inhibit your ability to provide adequate support.
- Acknowledge that it will take time to mourn and that bereavement is a process that occurs over months and years. Be aware that normal grief reactions often last longer than six months, depending on the type of loss and proximity to the child.
- Take advantage of school and community resources such as counseling, especially if children and youth do not seem to be coping well with grief and loss.

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