

Helping Grieving Children at School

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

A Student is Grieving

As a teacher or school counselor, you know how profoundly a student's home life affects her school life. The two are inextricably intertwined. When someone in the child's family dies, then, the death colors every moment of every day for the child. The child cannot "put her grief aside" while she learns and plays alongside the other students. Instead, she must learn to integrate her grief into all aspects of her life, including school.

You can help. By following the guidelines in this article, you will help the child cope with her grief and ease the transition from life before the death to life after the death.

School is a Place for Support

You are important to your students. From you they learn not only facts and figures, but behaviors and emotions. They also rely on you for support during the seven or so hours they are in your care each day. In many ways, you are not only their teacher or counselor, but their authority figure, role model friend and confidant during the school day.

So, school isn't just a place for book learning. It's a home away from home, a place for students to share their lives with others. When a student is grieving, he needs to share his new and scary feelings. He needs to know that like home, school will be a stable and loving refuge.

Talking to Children about Death

As a teacher or counselor, you are probably good at talking to children. You know that they respond better, for example, when you get down on their level and maintain eye contact. You ask open-ended questions to solicit their thoughts and feelings. Without talking down to them, you use language that they understand.

Keep up the good work. You'll need all these skills as you help students grieve. But you may find that talking about death isn't so easy. That's OK. Our culture as a whole has a hard time discussing death.

Actually, what grieving children need most is for someone to listen to and understand them-not to talk at them. Instead of worrying about what to say, try to create opportunities for your bereaved student to talk to you about the death.

Learn About Grief

To help your students cope with death and grief, you must continually enhance your own knowledge of childhood grief. While we will never evolve to a point of knowing "everything there is to know about death," we can always strive to broaden our understanding and degree of helpfulness. Take advantage of resources and training opportunities as they become available.

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Another part of learning about grief involves exploring your assumptions about life and death. Think about your own personal losses. Who close to you has died? What did their deaths mean to you? Were you a child when someone you loved died? If so, how did you feel? How did the important adults in your life-including teachers and counselors-help you with your feelings of grief? Thinking about these issues will help you better help your students.

Teach What You Learn to Students

Don't wait until a student's parents are killed in a car accident to teach your class about death and grief. Make lesson plans that incorporate these important topics into the curriculum. And use natural, everyday encounters with death-a run-over squirrel, a car accident that made local headlines-to talk about your students' fears and concerns.

Remember the concepts of the "teachable moment" and "created moment." The teachable moment occurs when an opportunity to teach children about life and death arises through events happening around them. A baby is born; a classmate's grandfather dies. When these events occur, make positive use of them by talking openly about them. The created moment means not waiting for "one big tell all" about death but working to create regular opportunities to teach children about death.

Children who have already been acquainted with the naturalness and permanence of death are more likely to grieve in healthy ways when someone they love dies.

Acting-Out in the Grieving Child

Many children express the pain of grief by acting-out. This behavior usually varies depending on the child's age and developmental level. The child may become unusually loud and noisy, have a temper outburst, start fights with other children, defy authority, or simply rebel against everything. Other examples of acting-out behavior include getting poor grades or assuming a general attitude that says, "I don't care about anything." Older children may even run away from home.

Underlying a grieving child's misbehavior are feelings of insecurity, abandonment and low self-esteem. This basic recognition is the essence of artfully helping during this difficult time. My experience as a grief counselor has shown me that probably the two greatest needs of a bereaved child are for affection and a sense of security. Appropriate limit-setting and discipline, then, should attempt to meet these essential needs. We must let bereaved children know that we care about them despite their present behavior.

Adult modeling and setting reasonable boundaries help bereaved children develop their internal controls while at the same time providing children the opportunity to make painful mistakes. As we all know, discovering we make mistakes as we grow up is an important lesson.

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When a Classmate Dies

Children aren't supposed to die. We all know and believe this truism. But the reality is, sometimes children do die. When a classmate dies, the other children will be profoundly impacted. They will probably feel a deep sense of loss and sadness, especially those who were among the classmate's close friends. Many will be curious. They will want to know what happened to Bobby and why. Some of the children will be afraid. When a classmate dies, children begin to understand that they, too, could die young. Other normal feelings include shock, anger and even relief.

Because the death was part of the children's school lives, you will be the primary caregiver your students will look to for help with their grief. The first school day after the death, spend some class time explaining what happened. Remember to use simple, concrete language and honestly answer their questions. Model your own feelings. If you want to cry, cry-without apologizing for it. Later in the day you might have the children make drawings or write letters to give to the dead student's parents.

Send a note home with students informing parents about the death. With parental permission, you might also arrange for interested students to attend the funeral. And don't forget, grief is a process, not an event. In the weeks and months to come, you will need to provide ongoing opportunities for your students to express their grief.

Getting Extra Help for the Bereaved Student

When a student seems to be having a particularly hard time dealing with grief, help him get extra help. Explore the full spectrum of helping services in your community. Hospice bereavement programs, church groups and private therapists are appropriate resources for some young people, while others may just need a little more time and attention from their parents or other caring adults.

If you decide that individual counseling outside the realm of school counseling might be able to help the bereaved student, try to find a counselor who specializes in bereavement counseling and has experience working with children. Scan your Yellow Pages for counselors citing grief or bereavement as a specialty. Another credential to look for is certification from the Association for Death Education and Counseling.

Guidelines for Helping Grieving Children

- Be a good observer. A bereaved child's behavior can be very telling about her emotions.
- Listen. Let each child teach you what grief is like for him. And don't rush in with explanations. Usually it's more helpful to ask exploring questions than to supply cookie-cutter answers.
- Be patient. Children's grief isn't typically obvious and immediate.
- Be honest. Don't lie to children about death. They need to know that it's permanent and irreversible. Don't use euphemisms that cloud these facts. Use simple and direct language.

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- Be available. Bereaved children need to know that they can count on the adults in their lives to listen to them, support them and love them.

About the Author

Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt is a noted author, educator and practicing grief counselor. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado and presents dozens of grief-related workshops each year across North America. Among his books are [Healing Your Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas](#) and [The Healing Your Grieving Heart Journal for Teens](#). For more information, write or call The Center for Loss and Life Transition, 3735 Broken Bow Road, Fort Collins, Colorado 80526, (970) 226-6050 or visit their website, www.centerforloss.com.

Related Resources

- [Healing Your Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas](#) (book)

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