

Supporting Students Through Grief and Loss

Helping Students Navigate Loss with Compassion and Understanding

Grief is a natural response to loss, but for children and adolescents, it can be especially difficult to understand and manage. Students may experience grief following the death of a family member, friend, classmate, or pet. By recognizing signs of grief and responding with empathy, schools can help students feel supported during challenging times.

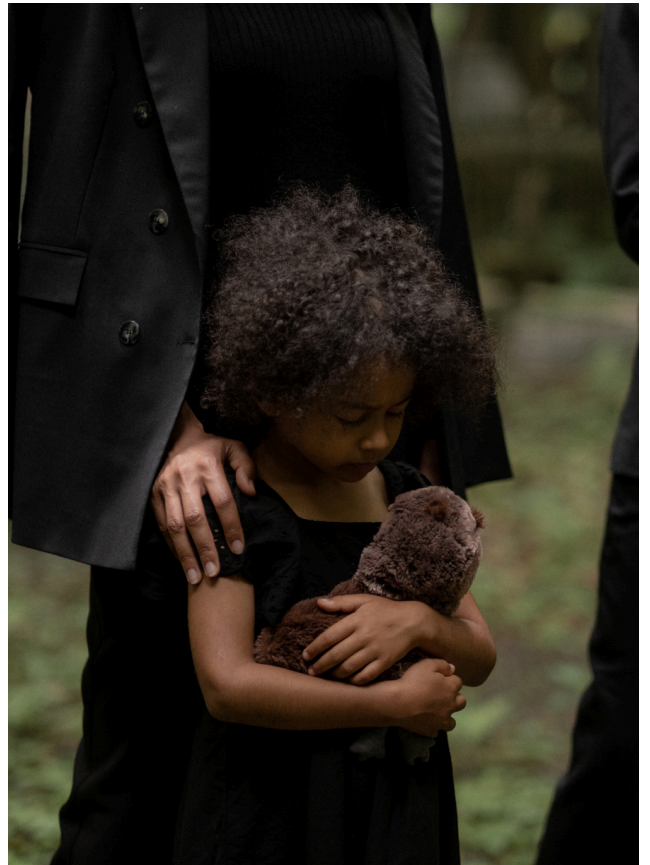
Grief looks different for every student. Some students may openly express sadness, while others may appear angry, withdrawn, distracted, or unaffected. Reactions can vary based on age, developmental level, cultural background, previous experiences with loss, and available support systems.

It is important to remember that grief is not a problem to fix. Instead, it is an experience to support as students learn to cope with and adjust to loss.

Common Signs of Grief

While grief affects everyone differently, some common signs may include:

- Difficulty concentrating or completing assignments
- Changes in behavior or mood
- Increased irritability, frustration, or emotional outbursts
- Withdrawal from friends, activities, or classroom participation
- Increased anxiety or worries about safety and loved ones
- Fatigue or changes in energy levels
- Frequent absences or visits to the nurse's office
- Expressions of sadness, guilt, confusion, or loneliness



Creating a Supportive School Environment

A caring and predictable school environment can provide an important source of stability for students experiencing grief. Educators can do several things to help create this environment.

Acknowledge the loss.

Students often benefit when trusted adults acknowledge what has happened rather than avoid the topic entirely. Simple statements such as, "I'm sorry for your loss," or "I'm here if you need support," can communicate care without putting pressure on the student to talk.

Maintain routines while providing flexibility.

Consistent routines help create a sense of security during times of uncertainty. At the same time, grieving students may need flexibility with assignments, participation expectations, or deadlines as they process their emotions.

Listen more than you speak.

Students may want to share memories, feelings, or concerns. Give them opportunities to talk while avoiding assumptions about how they should feel or how long their grief should last.

Provide opportunities for connection.

Grief can feel isolating. Encourage healthy peer relationships and ensure students remain connected to supportive adults and activities within the school community.

Respect individual and cultural differences.

Families and cultures may have different beliefs, traditions, and ways of expressing grief. Approach conversations with sensitivity and respect for each student's unique experience.



Day-to-Day Support

All school staff can play a role in supporting grieving students.

Educators can:

- Check in privately and periodically.
- Offer reassurance and emotional support.
- Be patient with changes in behavior or performance.
- Help students identify trusted adults they can turn to when needed.
- Communicate appropriately with families and support staff.
- Refer students to school counselors or mental health professionals when additional support is needed.



Students may not remember every lesson taught during a difficult season of life, but they often remember the adults who showed them kindness and understanding. When educators and school staff create safe, supportive environments, students are better equipped to navigate grief while maintaining a sense of connection and belonging.

Additional Resources

To view the resources used for this guide and more information, click on the links below.

<https://www.dougy.org>

<https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org>