When School Starts Back: Supporting grieving students during a pandemic

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Loss is Common in the Lives of Children

- 93% of classroom educators have never received any training in how to support a grieving student.
- 5% of children experience the death of a parent by 16.
- Vast majority of children (9 of 10) experience the death of a family member and/or friend by the time they complete high school.
Children may not appear to be grieving

- Adults may communicate death is not discussed
- Children may
  - not yet understand what has happened or its implications
  - be overwhelmed by feelings
  - express grief indirectly through behavior or play
Being with someone in distress

• Do not try to “cheer up” survivors
• Do not encourage to be strong or cover emotions
• Express feelings and demonstrate empathy
• Avoid statements such as: “I know exactly what you are going through” (you can’t), “You must be angry” (don’t tell person how to feel), “Both my parents died when I was your age” (don’t compete for sympathy)
• Allow child/family to be upset while suspending judgment – intervene only when safety/health is concern
Addressing cultural diversity

• Some people are worried they will say or do the wrong thing because they feel ill informed about another culture

• Although there are differences in cultural practices, the fundamental experience of grief is universal

• When we recognize that there is a range of ways to experience and express grief, we can explore ways to bridge cultural differences in order to help grieving children and families
Supporting children of a different culture

- Ask questions when you are unsure what would be most helpful for a family or individual
- Assumptions may result in stereotypes that cloud our perceptions and make us miss opportunities to be helpful
- Approach the family with an open mind and heart
- Help families identify and communicate what is important to them about cultural practices; work with them to find solutions and compromises when realities require modifications in cultural practices
Initiating the conversation

• Express concern
• Be genuine
• Invite conversation
• Listen and observe
• Limit personal sharing
• Offer practical advice
• Offer reassurance without minimizing concerns
• Maintain contact
Peer support

• Most children want to help friends, yet often have limited experience
• May make insensitive comments, ask repetitive or detailed questions, or tease grieving peer
• Study of children ages 6-15 who experienced death of parent: 20% “experienced direct, raw taunting about their loss”
• Educators can help students develop skills to support a peer who is grieving
Children’s guilt

• Young children tend to be:
  – Egocentric
  – Have limited understanding of cause of death
    → Magical thinking

• Results in guilt
  – Reassure children of lack of responsibility
Academic accommodations

• It is common for students to experience temporary academic challenges after a death; pre-existing learning challenges often become worse

• Offer academic support proactively – don’t wait for academic challenges to become academic failure

• Change an assignment, e.g.,
  – Allow student to work with a partner
  – Adapt formal research paper into more engaging assignment

• Change focus or timing of lesson

• Reschedule or adapt tests
Helpful responses to a grief trigger

• Provide a safe space or an adult the student can talk to
• Set procedures for the student to obtain support
• Let the student call a parent or family member if necessary
• Provide permission and encouragement to see school nurse, counselor, or social worker
• Offer private time with teacher to talk about feelings
Grief during a pandemic

- After a death, children often concerned about the health of themselves or others close to them
  - Important to help children deal with fears/concerns about the pandemic
- Physical distancing/school closure increase social isolation; makes it difficult to provide support
- Secondary losses become even more of an issue
- Family members may be overwhelmed by the pandemic in addition to their own grief
- Some grief may not be related to death
- Supporting grieving students can be difficult in the best of times; this is not the best of times
Coalition to Support Grieving Students

- American Federation of School Administrators (AFSA)
- American Federation of Teachers (AFT)
- American School Counselors Association (ASCA)
- National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)
- National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)
- National Association of School Nurses (NASN)
- National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)
- National Education Association (NEA)
- School Social Workers Association of America (SSWAA)
- School Superintendents Association (AASA)
Supporting Organizational Members
Modules Placed into Six Sections

- Each section contains 2-4 video modules; each video is accompanied by handout that summarizes major points
- Conversation and Support
- Developmental and Cultural Considerations
- Practical Considerations
- Reactions and Triggers
- Professional Preparation and Self-Care
- Crisis and Other Special Circumstances
Additional Resources

• Additional Modules (e.g., police or military deaths)
• Guidance Documents
  – Practical guidelines developed by the NCSCB on how to respond to the death of a student or staff, from all causes or from suicide
• Training module
• Family and school staff booklets
• Articles
• Online Resources
www.grievingstudents.org

Order Free Materials (download)

After a loved one dies—
How children grieve and how parents and other adults can support them.