

## *Grief in the Classroom*

Grief is a very individual process for everyone. It is important for professionals in your school to remember that there is no right or wrong way for students to grieve. Keep in mind that each person's past experience with loss will inevitably influence their reaction to the loss that you are currently experiencing in your school.

Grief in the classroom is an invisible crisis that significantly affects a student's learning environment each and every day. Loss is an event that produces many different responses. There are many different types of loss, such as; death, divorce, family separation, changing schools, not making a team, new baby in the home or domestic violence. The pain from loss is called grief. Our body helps us deal with loss through various physical, behavioral, cognitive and emotional responses. Keep in mind that children have a limited amount of life experience, therefore, the grief process and the ways in which their body responds may be confusing or scary. It is important to educate students about what to expect and to give them permission to experience grief, rather than to avoid it.

Children's grief often mimics normal childhood behaviors. You may or may not even notice when a student is grieving however, you should be prepared to expect some unusual behaviors. It is also good to familiarize yourself with the many common feelings and behaviors associated with loss and grief. Most of these reactions are normal and usually subside in the months following a loss. Some normal expressions of grief include; irritability, lack of concentration, regression, overachieving, explosive emotions, preoccupation with death, guilt, daydreaming, sadness, fidgeting, withdrawal and unexplained physical ailments. Be sure to refer a student to a professional counselor if they were a witness or directly involved in the loss, if they threaten to hurt themselves, if they physically hurt themselves or others, if they destroy property or if you are noticing extreme or prolonged grief responses.

Teachers and other school professionals should become educated about normal grief responses in children to better manage grief and loss in the classroom and to be able to incorporate supportive activities into curriculums. It is often helpful to have a counselor who specializes in grief to provide an in-service to staff or students before or after the school experiences a significant loss. It is equally important that school professionals do not view a visit by a grief counselor as the only solution to helping students deal with the grief process.

Adults are natural role models for children. Be sure to recognize your own feelings associated with grief and loss and take good care of yourself. Allow students the opportunity to discuss their loss and to create special memorials. Teachers should have flexible academic expectations, and plan to revisit grief in the classroom several weeks and even a few months after the classroom experiences a significant loss. Although routines and consistency are important to help children feel safe and secure, so are creating new rituals and allowing children permission to grieve. Although you can't take a child's pain away, remember that compassion and patience combined with good communication will foster resiliency and help your school heal after a loss.



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