



# Cultural Sensitivity

## Take-Home Message

Families from different cultures may follow specific traditions, rituals, and practices after a death. Although there are real differences between cultures, the fundamental experience of grief is universal. Rather than attempting to gain knowledge about every culture, teachers can aspire to achieve a general sensitivity to the unique needs of children and families coping with loss.

## Different Cultures Express Grief in Different Ways

Individuals from different cultures may follow specific traditions and practices after the death of a loved one. These practices are informed by the different cultural beliefs, norms, and expectations that guide the bereaved person's behaviors.

One culture may expect its members not to speak the name of the person who died. Another may encourage families to name the next child born after the deceased. People of one culture may believe that each tear shed creates another hardship for the deceased, so remain quiet and reserved at funerals. Those of another may believe the extent of love for the person who died is demonstrated by the degree of emotions expressed at the funeral.

It is understandable that school personnel may not be familiar with the rituals and expectations of every culture represented among their students. Sometimes, rather than reaching out to a family after the death of a loved one, school staff will minimize their interactions with the family to avoid doing something inappropriate or offending the family somehow.

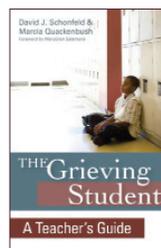
Although these are real differences, the fundamental experience of grief is universal. If someone is able to be empathetic, thoughtful, sensitive, and supportive to grieving children of one culture, chances are quite good that this person will be able to help children of another culture as well. Being observant, genuinely curious, respectful, and responsive to your students will enable you to learn about their families and cultures and be guided by their responses. Often what works best is to simply be present, express your concern, and remain available to provide helpful assistance.

## Be Observant

We are all enriched when we learn about different cultural beliefs, expectations, and traditions. When we recognize that there is a range of acceptable ways to experience and express grief, we can watch for approaches that may vary from our own and explore ways to bridge cultural differences in order to truly help our students and their families.

1. Ask questions. Ask openly when you are unsure what would be most helpful for a family or individual. For example:
  - “Can you tell me how your family and your culture recognize and cope with the death of a family member? How does this fit with your own preferences at this time?”
  - “Can you help me understand how I can best be of help to you and your family?”
2. Watch out for assumptions. Even if you know about the common practices of a culture, this may not accurately predict how a family or individual from that culture will behave. Many people have been exposed to multiple cultures. Parents sometimes have different beliefs or practices from their children. Some families or individuals choose to follow practices of a different culture when these align better with their current beliefs or preferences.
 

Assumptions may result in stereotypes that cloud our perceptions and make us miss opportunities to be helpful.
3. Be present and authentic. Even if you don't know about a particular culture's practices concerning death and grief, you can approach the family with an open mind and heart. Be guided by their responses. This works well across many different cultures.



For more information on supporting grieving students, refer to *The Grieving Student: A Teacher's Guide* by David Schonfeld and Marcia Quackenbush.

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