

# Grief Triggers

## Take-Home Message

Grief triggers are sudden reminders of the person who died that cause powerful emotional responses in grieving children. They are most common in the first few months after the death, but may happen at any time.

School professionals can prepare students with information about grief triggers, proactively establish a safety plan with grieving students, and approach potentially difficult classroom lessons or activities with increased awareness. This creates a more supportive classroom environment that is appreciated by all students.

## What Grief Triggers Are Like

After a significant loss, students may unexpectedly encounter situations or comments that remind them of the person who has died. This can cause sudden and intense feelings of distress and other strong emotions.

This can be unsettling at any time, but especially so when it occurs in a school setting. Students are caught off guard. They may feel a loss of control. This can be especially disheartening after they seemed to be gaining some relief from the strong feelings that occurred immediately after the death.

Students may worry that they'll start crying in front of classmates or otherwise embarrass themselves. They may feel overwhelmed and unable to ask for support.



## How Children Feel and Respond

**Children experiencing a grief trigger may respond many ways, including one or more of the following:**

- **Outbursts of anger or sadness**
- **Uncontrollable crying**
- **Feelings of emptiness**
- **Feeling out of control or frightened**
- **Embarrassment**
- **Inability to concentrate**
- **Frustration or disappointment (“I thought I was getting better, and now I’m out of control again”)**
- **Wishing to escape the situation, to “get out of the room”**

## Common Grief Triggers

Events such as the following may act as grief triggers for children if they are associated with the person who died:

- Hearing a song or seeing a TV show
- Going to or seeing a photo of a place
- Smells or sounds
- Hearing a news report (of someone who died in a similar way, for example)
- Special occasions (holidays, birthdays, Mother’s Day or Father’s Day)
- Transitions (graduation, starting at a new school, moving)
- Lost opportunities (vacations, performances, sports events, father-daughter dances)

In a school setting, the class may be talking about a city in social studies that reminds the student of a prior family vacation and special time spent with the deceased. A peer may comment over lunch about a television show the student had always watched with a sibling who died. The class may be asked to discuss an assignment with their mother or father, and the student is reminded that she no longer has two parents. Almost anything can serve as a grief trigger.

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## Supporting a Child Experiencing a Grief Trigger

Support from teachers and schools can help students move through these experiences in a positive and productive way. Ideally, there will be a chance to explain proactively to grieving children that it is fairly common for such triggers to occur. Reassure them that, while intense, the immediate experience will pass.

School professionals can work with a child to develop a plan for grief triggers. Options include:

- Identify a safe space or location where the student can go. This might be the library, a study hall, a nearby classroom, or the office of the school counselor, school nurse, school psychologist, or school social worker.
- Provide the child with the name of an adult he or she can see when feeling upset or wishing to talk.
- Set up procedures that allow the student to obtain support, such as a signal or statement that doesn't draw attention but does allow the student to leave the classroom. It's difficult for children to ask for help and expose their vulnerabilities in front of peers when they are already feeling overwhelmed.
- Allow the child to call a parent or family member if he or she feels it would help.
- Give permission and encouragement for the child to speak with a school counselor, school nurse, school psychologist, or school social worker.
- Offer private time with a teacher to talk over feelings, questions, or other concerns.

When children know there is a plan in place to deal with grief triggers, they feel less trapped when they occur. If children know they can leave without drawing attention to themselves, they become less anxious. Their distress passes more quickly, and they actually rarely need to leave the classroom. They are more likely to remain in class and be available for learning.

## Anticipate and Minimize Triggers

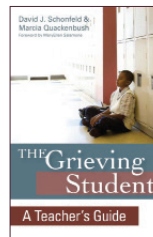
When possible, it's helpful to anticipate and minimize grief triggers. Here are some steps that will help.

- Expect that triggers may occur around holidays, Mother's Day and Father's Day, the child's birthday, the birthday of the deceased, or the anniversary of the person's death. Children and their families may be able to suggest dates that may be difficult.

Note: Children who have a parent deployed in the military, living in another city or state, in prison, or otherwise absent from their daily life may also experience sadness or distress at similar times.

- Introduce class activities in a way that acknowledges absences and offers alternatives. Example:  

“For this Father's Day activity, I'd like you to focus on your father or another important male adult in your life—someone who cares for you and has provided support. If your father is not living, or he does not live with you, you can still complete this activity with him in mind if you wish.”
- Make an effort to reach out to grieving students at school events where the absence of a loved one may be especially noticeable (performances, sporting events, science fairs).
- Introduce subjects such as serious illness, accidental death, war, or violence with sensitivity. Recognize that students in your class may have lost a family member or close friend in one of these ways.



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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