

Coping With Loss

On any given day at least several grieving children are likely to attend your school. Approximately 5 percent of children experience the death of a parent and 90 percent experience the death of a family member or close friend by the time they finish high school.

Children who are actively grieving generally find it hard to concentrate or retain new information when they are distracted by thoughts or worries related to their loss. They often have difficulty sleeping or eating and might come to class feeling exhausted. Thus, addressing bereavement in schools is essential to promoting academic success.

Behavior change can also be seen. Children might become withdrawn or fearful of separating from family members, resulting in school avoidance. They might show social regression—becoming irritable, demanding, and more self-centered. Older children and adolescents might act out or engage in risk-taking behavior, includ-

ing tobacco, alcohol, and drug use.

Schools are an excellent site for the delivery of supportive services to grieving children and families. School personnel might be the only professionals in a position to offer timely advice on funeral attendance, or recommendations on how to help children understand death and cope with difficult feelings such as guilt. School staff can help parents find supports within the community.

Children who sense that their parents are having trouble coping often keep their questions and concerns to themselves. These children might feel safer speaking with school staff who typically have some emotional distance

and who might therefore be in a better position to answer questions, identify resources for support, and suggest coping strategies.

Role of Schools

Families might benefit from assistance in dealing with secondary losses that accompany death. The death of a parent might result in financial stresses and require the family to move in with relatives or to a less expensive home or neighborhood. Such moves often require a change in school and remove children from peer networks and trusted adults in the school who could provide support. Some schools provide transportation so that a child can remain in his or her school even after such relocation. Students might drop out of extracurricular activities or sports because the surviving parent is unable to provide transportation; alternatives can often be identified if extracurricular group advisors work with the PTA and others.

Get help navigating the Common Core Standards at naesp.org

- Implementation checklist
- Online issue of *Principal* magazine focused on the Common Core
- Other helpful resources for principals

Visit the Resources Section at naesp.org



In addition to adjusting to the loss of a family member or friend, children also must cope with the loss of everything associated with the individual who died and what that person meant in their lives. Even children who appear to be coping well with a loss might experience grief triggers that result in a temporary resurgence of strong feelings of sadness. These grief triggers might come up unexpectedly on special occasions or during everyday events that remind them of the person who died. Some examples include anniversaries of the death and holidays; special events that highlight the absence of a loved one, such as a father-daughter dance; a teacher inquiry about “what your parents do for a living;” hearing a song in music class that the deceased enjoyed; or reading aloud in class about a character who dies in a similar manner. Principals should advise teachers to talk with students about strategies for dealing with grief triggers, such as establishing

a plan for a safe place they can go to during class if they feel overwhelmed or wish to talk to someone.

The loss of a close family member or friend is a life-changing event. Even though children are generally able to return to active learning within a couple of weeks or months after a personal loss, they are not “over it.” The death of someone we care deeply about stays with us for the rest of our lives. Principals should encourage staff to monitor children’s adjustment over time and share insights about helpful ways to provide support.

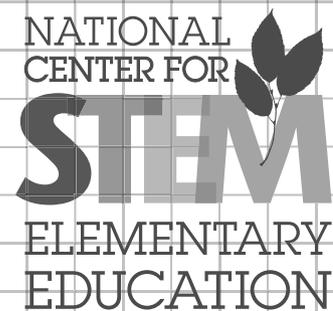
Professional Development

School staff, including principals and mental health professionals, often have little or no bereavement-related training. In worrying that they might do or say something wrong and upset a grieving child, they sometimes choose to say nothing. But avoidance is the wrong approach to take. It communicates to children that what has happened is

too awful to speak about or that adults either don’t care or are not competent to provide support. Principals should ensure that professional development on bereavement is part of the continuing education provided to their school staff. The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement (NCSCB) offers a PowerPoint presentation that can be used for such training (www.cincinnatichildrens.org/school-crisis). The presentation offers practical advice on how to initiate a conversation with children after a personal loss and to help them discover effective coping strategies.

Additional training is necessary to plan for losses that directly impact the school community. The NCSCB has prepared downloadable guides with practical steps that schools can follow after the death of a student or staff member. Principals should establish a school crisis team and procedures for responding to the death of a student or staff member. The NCSCB website

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includes downloadable template notification letters and scripts for notifying staff, students, and parents. The guidelines also address establishing grief counseling support rooms and protocols related to service delivery, parent notification, and consent, as well as indications for referral to community mental health services. Principals should establish thoughtful policies related to student attendance at funerals and memorial services and how to handle school memorial and commemoration activities.

Helping at a Time of Great Need

Supporting grieving children can be emotionally exhausting and stressful for staff. Principals play a critical role in establishing a school climate where professionals are free to express when they are emotionally affected by difficult events. Principals can model and promote self-care and stress management.

True leaders often emerge in a crisis setting, but dealing with a school crisis can be particularly challenging for those in leadership positions. The NCSCB provides free consultation and technical support to principals.

Schools are not expected to provide bereavement counseling to students. But with a little education and support, staff can provide assistance to children and their families at a time of great need. They can help children learn to accept one of life's hardest lessons. Many educators enter the field to form a genuine connection with students and have a lasting impact on their learning and their lives. There is probably no greater opportunity to realize that aspiration than when educators reach out to grieving students. 

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