

# Best Practices for School-Based Support Groups for Bereaved Students

A collaborative project developed in partnership between:



COALITION *to* SUPPORT  
GRIEVING STUDENTS

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**The New York Life Foundation and the American Federation of Teachers “Grief in School Survey”<sup>1</sup> found:**

**95% of educators**  
say they would like to do more to help students who are grieving.

**97% of educators**  
believe grief adversely impacts learning.

**93% of educators**  
agree that childhood grief is a serious problem that deserves more attention from schools.

**87% of educators**  
reported at least one student each school year needs support due to the death of someone significant, and 25% reported six or more students need support.

**87% of educators**  
agree with the statement, “over the past five years, it has become more common for students at my school to seek out emotional support from their teachers”.

**58% of educators**  
have experienced the death of a significant member of their school community. 50% the death of a staff member, 44% the death of a student due to an accident, and 42% the death of a student due to illness.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.newyorklife.com/assets/foundation/docs/pdfs/key-findings-and-topline.pdf>

## Introduction for School-Based Mental Health Professionals

Grief is a natural response to the death of someone important in our lives. At some point during their school years, most students will experience the death of a family member, friend, or other significant person in their lives. For some, this may be their first experience with death; for others, it may be one of several losses they have experienced. In every case, the way the school community responds can have a significant impact on their emotional well-being, academic engagement, and overall development. Schools are more than just places of learning—they are central hubs of connection, care, and community.

Offering school-based grief support groups ensures students receive care in the environment where they spend most of their time, helping them process a death in a safe, structured, and supportive setting. These groups normalize the grief experience, reduce feelings of isolation, and create opportunities for students to connect with peers who understand what they are going through. By teaching healthy coping strategies and fostering resilience, groups can lessen feelings of anxiety and depression while also strengthening emotional regulation and social skills. Importantly, they help reduce the negative impact of grief on learning by improving concentration, attendance, and academic engagement. School-based groups are also highly accessible, remove barriers such as transportation or cost, and they promote a compassionate school culture that demonstrates grief is a natural part of life and no student has to face it alone.

This resource offers practical guidance for school-based mental health professionals on facilitating grief support groups for students who are grieving the recent death of someone important in their lives. While the primary focus is on bereavement related to death, some considerations may also apply to other types of grief. It is not intended to provide background on childhood bereavement, as professionals leading these groups should already have training and experience supporting children who are grieving. It also does not serve as a curriculum or establish any clinical standard. Instead, it brings together best practices, step-by-step planning tools, and grief-informed strategies to help you confidently create an environment where students feel seen, heard, and supported.

Inside, you will find preparation guidance for facilitators and stakeholders, strategies for fostering a supportive group environment, session planning tools with activities and facilitation tips, communication frameworks for engaging caregivers, logistical support for scheduling and documentation, and resource connections linking students and families to local and national grief support.

This guide offers a framework, not a rigid prescription. Every school and student's grief journey is unique, so adapt these recommendations to fit your school's culture, resources, and the specific needs of the students you serve. Some students may share openly, others more quietly, but all benefit from their grief being acknowledged, their feelings validated, and being reminded they are not alone. Leading a grief support group is both rewarding and challenging, requiring preparation, sensitivity, flexibility, and self-care.

By leading this work in your school, you are helping to build a culture that recognizes grief as a normal part of life and responds with empathy and support. You are making a difference—not only in the lives of individual students but in your school and the broader community.

# STAFFING

## Group Preparation

### Identifying qualified facilitators

The first step in preparing for a student bereavement support group is identifying trained and qualified facilitators with sufficient time to plan and implement the program. This professional will have appropriate training and experience to support students who are grieving. This guidance is not intended to substitute for this required training and expertise. The lead for the group could be a school-based mental health professional, which includes school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists, or school nurses.

Optimal groups function best with a minimum of two facilitators to ensure effective group dynamics and consistent support. Having more than one facilitator allows for balanced facilitation, shared responsibility, and greater continuity. When forming your team, consider the strengths and roles of each facilitator to create a balanced and responsive dynamic.

Facilitators must be given adequate time in their schedules to prepare for sessions, co-facilitate, and complete session wrap-up (e.g., debriefing, organizing materials).

### Stakeholder engagement in preparation for a group

Engaging stakeholders in the school is essential to the success and sustainability of a student bereavement support group. It ensures understanding and support, securing resources, identifying participants, reducing barriers for students and families, and fostering a grief-sensitive school culture.

#### Examples of stakeholders:

- Teachers
- School-based mental health professionals
- School administration (Examples: principals, school board)
- Educational support professionals (Examples: cafeteria staff, custodians, front office staff, bus drivers)
- Caregivers
- Coaches
- Community partners (Examples: local grief center)
- Student body, where appropriate

#### Strategies to build engagement with stakeholders include:

- Educating about the support needs of bereaved children
- Explaining how and why the group is an effective strategy to address those needs
- Increasing awareness and education within the school to:
  - ◊ Allocate necessary resources (time, space, staffing)
  - ◊ Help identify participants
  - ◊ Support student participation
- Communicating with caregivers and referral sources to explain the group's purpose and structure, support participant identification, and reduce barriers to engagement

### Plan and Facilitate the Group

Facilitators establish a clear purpose for the group and create session plans that support engagement, reflection, and connection. Effective groups:

- Are grounded in trust, inclusivity, and cultural humility
- Foster belonging by honoring each student's unique grief experience
- Respect diverse beliefs and perspectives on grief

Facilitators must also consider participants' age and developmental stage ([View the NACG's Developmental Understandings Resource](#)) when designing activities and choosing materials. Effective planning includes:

- Setting a clear theme or outcome for each session
- Preparing age-appropriate materials (e.g., art supplies, worksheets)
- Anticipating individual needs and group dynamics

### Facilitator Support

Leading bereavement groups in schools is meaningful but emotionally demanding work. Facilitators supporting children sharing their grief experiences can be reminded of their own. Over time, this exposure can lead to compassion fatigue.

Clinical supervision or peer consultation is essential for school-based mental health professionals. It supports emotional well-being, skill development, and ethical practice. Continuing to access regular, confidential debriefing or supervision will help facilitators:

- Process difficult stories
- Reflect on their practice
- Address ethical questions
- Manage compassion fatigue
- Grow professionally

Supervision also fosters self-awareness and supports resilience. While the work can be heavy, it is also rewarding. Facilitators have the privilege of instilling hope, easing suffering, and witnessing the resilience of children who are grieving.

### Caring for Yourself to Sustain the Work

Self-care is not optional in grief support—it is necessary. Supervisors support facilitators in identifying and using coping strategies in three key areas:

- **Task-Oriented & Solution-Focused Coping** – (e.g., scheduling breaks between groups, setting boundaries around availability)
- **Emotional Coping** – (e.g., mindfulness, grounding exercises, personal rituals, seeking emotional support)
- **Cognitive Coping** – (e.g., identifying thought patterns, using positive reframing, accessing supervision regularly)

Facilitators also build a strong support network outside of supervision, including trusted colleagues, friends, and other mental health professionals.

## Resources for Grief and Bereavement Support

These organizations have additional resources to support you. We encourage you to create a list of local support available for children in your program. These include local grief centers and support groups, community counseling services, hospice and palliative care, faith-based support programs, and other community-based programs.

### Coalition to Support Grieving Students

Creates and shares a set of industry-endorsed resources empowering school communities across America in the ongoing support of their grieving students.

Website: [grievingstudents.org](http://grievingstudents.org)

### National Alliance for Children's Grief (NACG)

Resources include webinars, toolkits, and training for professionals working with grieving children and families.

Website: [childrengrieve.org](http://childrengrieve.org)

### National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

Offers comprehensive resources, guidance, and consultation for schools navigating crises and bereavement.

Website: [schoolcrisiscenter.org](http://schoolcrisiscenter.org)

# STUDENT RECRUITMENT

This section outlines best practices for identifying participants, screening for readiness, and engaging school staff and caregivers.

Supporting students through grief is a vital part of school mental health services. Bereavement groups offer a structured, supportive space where students can understand and name their emotions, connect with peers who have experienced similar losses, and learn helpful coping strategies. To ensure these groups are both effective and accessible, a clear recruitment and selection process is key.

## Identifying Potential Participants

To identify students who may benefit, engage all school personnel who have regular contact with students. Potential sources of referrals include:

- Current and former teachers
- School-based mental health professionals
- Educational support professionals
- Coaches and extracurricular advisors
- Other trusted support staff

Ask staff to identify any students who have experienced the death of a family member or other person in their life.

## Group Selection Considerations

Careful group composition is essential. The following criteria can help identify students who are likely to benefit from a group setting. Appropriate group members must:

- Have experienced the death of someone significant
- Express interest and willingness to participate
- Attend most or all sessions
- Be able to participate effectively in a group setting

## When Individual Support May Be More Appropriate

Some students may benefit from one-on-one support or an alternative intervention if they are currently experiencing challenges that would limit the effectiveness of group participation, such as:

- Disruptive behaviors that impact group functioning
- Difficulty maintaining physical and emotional boundaries
- Active substance use
- Aggressive or bullying behaviors
- Significant cognitive or learning challenges
- Grief only from non-death losses (e.g., parental incarceration, divorce) if the group is focused specifically on death-related grief

Being thoughtful in matching students with the right level of support helps protect group safety and ensures each student's needs are addressed in the most appropriate way.

### Support Group Considerations

Some students may require individual counseling either before joining a group or in place of group participation. Indicators that a student may need more individualized support include:

- Significant behavioral changes
- Signs of depression or traumatic stress responses
- Difficulty functioning in group settings

These students may benefit from more tailored interventions until they are ready to participate in a group safely and meaningfully.

### Referral Process

Establish a structured referral process to manage communication and documentation. Consider:

- **Who can refer:** Teachers, school-based mental health professionals, caregivers, students themselves
- **How referrals are made:** Create a simple referral form (paper or digital) including:
  - ◊ Student name
  - ◊ Name of referral source
  - ◊ Grade and Teacher
  - ◊ Reason for referral
- **Promote the group through:**
  - ◊ Flyers or info sheets
  - ◊ Parent/caregiver portals
  - ◊ Back-to-school nights or counselor newsletters

### Screening and Consultation

A brief intake process helps assess readiness and fit for group participation. When meeting with a referred student, explore:

- Their relationship to the deceased
- Time since the death
- Other grief experiences (e.g., multiple losses)
- Current support system
- Impact of grief on their routines and functioning
- Comfort in group or peer-based settings
- Willingness to participate in the group format

### Permission Slips and Consent Form

Discuss with school administration if consent is required from caregivers for participation in the group. Administration can guide school-based mental health professionals in what is required. When needed, permission forms need to clearly communicate:

- The group's purpose
- What participation involves
- Privacy expectations
- What families can expect from their child's involvement

A sample consent form you can use and print is available on the next page.

# Consent Form for Grief Support Group Participation

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_ School Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade: \_\_\_\_\_ Facilitator(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Group Start Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Group End Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Purpose of the Group

Your child has been invited to participate in a grief support group offered at school for students who have experienced the death of a family member, friend, or other significant person in their lives. The goal of this group is to provide a safe, supportive space where students can:

- Learn about the grief process
- Express thoughts and emotions
- Share memories
- Develop coping strategies
- Connect with peers who are also grieving the death of an important person in their lives

## Group Details

Group Size: Small group format

Duration: Weekly sessions for approximately \_\_\_\_ weeks

Session Length: \_\_\_\_ minutes per session

Location: Held in a private, confidential school setting

## What to Expect

Participation is voluntary, and students will not be forced to speak or share. Activities may include creative projects, discussions, journaling, and other age-appropriate activities designed to support emotional exploration and healing. Your child will always have the right to pass or opt out of any activity.

## Consent

Please read and sign below if you give permission for your child to participate in the grief support group. Your signature confirms that you understand the purpose of the group.

Yes, I give permission for my child to participate in the grief support group.

No, I do not give permission for my child to participate in the grief support group.

Parent/Guardian Name (Printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_ Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**Optional:** Please share anything you would like the facilitators to know about your child's experience with death or how they are currently coping on the back of this sheet.

## Questions?

If you have questions or concerns about the group, please contact:

[Facilitator Name], [Phone Number], [Email Address]

Thank you for allowing us to support your child during this important time.

## Group Composition and Considerations

Group structure balances developmental fit and grade level. Common groupings are K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12. While this is the recommendation, remember that flexibility is key.

Some considerations could be:

- Aim for similar developmental levels to support connection and conversation.
- In small schools, mixed-age groups can work well, especially when students share a strong common experience.
- If possible, group students by relationship to the deceased (e.g., parent, sibling) or cause of death (e.g., homicide, illness) to create shared context.

While timelines may be suggested, student readiness guides group inclusion. Grief is not linear, and each child's pace will vary.

## Family Education and Resources

Supporting the family unit strengthens the student's grief journey. Consider providing caregivers with:

- Handouts or videos on children's grief
- Book lists (curated by age and topic)
  - ◊ Collaborate with your school librarian to develop a grief book list available for student and caregiver checkout.
- Articles on how to support children who are grieving at home
- A list of trusted organizations, such as:
  - ◊ [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#)
  - ◊ [National Alliance for Children's Grief \(NACG\)](#)
  - ◊ [National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement](#)
- After a Loved One Dies resource by the New York Life Foundation [English](#) | [Spanish](#)

# GROUP LOGISTICS

Establishing a peer support group in a school setting requires careful logistical planning to ensure a supportive and consistent experience for students who are grieving. The following guidance outlines best practices across scheduling, location, communication, materials, and preparation. These considerations are grounded in grief-informed care and aim to foster emotional and physical safety for all participants.

## Scheduling Considerations

Thoughtful scheduling plays a key role in the success of a grief support group. While consistency helps create structure and security, flexibility allows the group to adapt to the school calendar and student needs. The goal is to establish a reliable schedule that supports participation while minimizing academic disruption.

### Establishing a Schedule Framework

Balancing consistency with flexibility requires understanding your school's rhythms and students' readiness. An effective schedule will:

- Offer predictable meeting times that students can rely on
- Accommodate school events, holidays, and testing
- Minimize academic disruption across different subjects
- Consider students' energy levels and emotional availability
- Avoid key social times like lunch and recess whenever possible

### Optimal Scheduling Options

When scheduling, always inform teachers about which part of class students will miss and coordinate a system for making up assignments or content.

Recommended Times:

- **Advisory or Flex Periods:** Non-academic blocks are ideal for support groups.
- **Rotating Periods:** Rotate meeting times to avoid repeat absences from the same class.
- **Split Block Periods:** Use half a class period to reduce classroom disruption.

Times to Avoid:

- **Before or After School:** May present transportation challenges or conflict with extracurricular activities.
- **Lunch and Recess:** These are valuable social and physical breaks; avoid unless no other options are available.
- **Monday or Friday:** These are more often holidays or part of long weekends for students.

### Duration Guidelines

Consider the average age and number of children in the group when setting the duration. Typical groups last between 45 and 60 minutes. Duration can be adapted based on school schedules.

Allow 5–10 minutes on either side of the session for transitions to and from class.

## Location Considerations

Creating a consistent, safe environment is important to the success of a grief support group. The physical space where groups meet can significantly impact participants' comfort level and willingness to share their experiences.

### Key Characteristics of an Ideal Location

The most effective grief support group spaces share these qualities:

- Private with a closing door and minimal hallway traffic
- Quiet and separated from disruptive areas like cafeterias, gyms, or outdoor zones
- Consistently available at the same time each session
- Big enough for the group to sit in a circle but small enough to feel contained
- Comfortable seating and climate control (light, ventilation, temperature)

### Recommended Spaces

- Counseling offices
- Conference or administrative meeting rooms
- Classrooms not in use during the group time

### Preparing the Space

Before each session, take time to set up the space intentionally:

- Arrange seating in a circle or semi-circle to encourage connection
- Ensure adequate lighting and a comfortable temperature
- Post a "Do Not Disturb" or "Meeting in Progress" sign, if appropriate
- Have tissues and water. Consider snacks if allowed.
- Clear the space of unnecessary items that might distract from the group process

### Pro Tip

Consider having a backup location identified in case of unexpected circumstances. This should meet the same criteria as your primary space.

## Creating a Supportive Group Environment

The emotional climate of the group begins with intentional structure and shared understanding. Taking time to establish group expectations helps build trust and promotes a sense of belonging. When students feel secure, they're more likely to participate openly, engage with their grief, and build meaningful connections with peers. Facilitators play a critical role in shaping this environment through thoughtful preparation, structure, and clear expectations.

### Developing Group Rules

Create group rules collaboratively with students during the first session to foster ownership and mutual respect. Consider these approaches:

- Inviting student input when setting expectations
- Posting group rules visibly at each session
- Reference and reinforce group rules regularly
- Revisit and adjust group rules as needed

### Pro Tip

Consider creating a colorful visual of the group rules and display it at each session.

**Essential Rules to Include:**

It is helpful to consider the following list when supporting the group in establishing their rules:

- **Respect and Non-Judgment**
  - Recognize that grief looks different for everyone
  - Listen without interrupting or offering unsolicited advice
  - Avoid comparing losses—each person's experience is valid and unique
  - Use kind, supportive, and inclusive language
- **Right to Pass**
  - Participation is always encouraged, never forced
  - Students may choose not to speak and feel respected in their choice
  - Provide other ways to engage (e.g., art, writing, listening)
  - Validate and acknowledge non-verbal participation
- **Setting an Expectation of Privacy**
  - Set clear expectations around group privacy
  - Emphasize that what is shared in the group stays in the group



**Important Note:** Be sure to explain confidentiality limits clearly during the first session. Use age-appropriate language to help students understand that certain disclosures require additional support beyond the group. Consider cultural norms, accessibility needs, and neurodiversity when presenting group guidelines to ensure all participants feel safe, seen, and included.

**Sample Script for Explaining Confidentiality Limits as a Facilitator:**

*"In our group, we're going to talk about some important and sometimes personal things. I want you to know that what you share here is private. That means I won't go tell other students or teachers what you say, and I ask everyone here to do the same—what's shared in the group stays in the group.*

*But there are a few times when I can't keep something private, because my job is also to help keep you safe. If you tell me something that makes me think:*

- You might be hurt or unsafe,
- Someone might be hurting you,
- You might be planning to hurt yourself, or
- You might be planning to hurt someone else,

*I have to talk to another grown-up who can help keep you or someone else safe. I'll always do my best to tell you if I need to share something, and we can talk together about what will happen next.*

*I know everyone's experiences and cultures are different, and that's okay—here in our group, we respect each other's ways of feeling, talking, and remembering. My job is to make sure everyone feels safe, included, and supported."*

## Examples of Group Rules

### Elementary School Version | Our Group Promises

- What we share in the group stays between us, unless someone's safety is at risk.
- We can trust each other by being honest.

- Come to every group if you can.
- Use your words to tell us how you feel instead of actions.
- You can choose how to take part—talking, listening, or doing activities all count.
- Be kind: no blaming, teasing, or talking about group members.
- Help make our group a safe and caring place for everyone.

### Middle & High School Version | Group Agreements

- What is shared here stays here unless there's a safety concern.
- We build trust by showing up, being honest, and respecting each other.
- Commit to attending regularly so the group feels consistent for everyone.
- Communicate with words, not actions.
- Respect that people may participate in different ways—through sharing, listening, or creative expression.
- Avoid blaming, gossiping, or talking negatively about others.
- Work together to keep this a safe, supportive, and positive space.

## Managing Group Dynamics

Even with thoughtful participant selection, challenges may arise during the course of a grief support group. Proactive planning, flexible facilitation, and ongoing monitoring are essential to maintaining a safe and supportive environment.

### Establish Clear Protocols

Have defined response plans in place for handling group challenges:

- Develop strategies for responding to disruptive behavior or breaches in privacy (e.g. reset expectations, limit participation, removal from group)

### Individual Check-ins

Some students may need extra support or a different intervention. Private check-ins can help assess individual needs.

- Meet one-on-one with students who are struggling in group
- Determine if continued group participation is appropriate
- Offer alternative support options if needed (e.g., individual counseling)
- Document concerns and steps taken

### Adaptive Facilitation

Strong facilitation skills allow the group to remain responsive and supportive, even when issues arise:

- Balance structure with flexibility
- Address interpersonal or behavioral challenges promptly
- Model respectful communication and emotional expression
- Maintain professional boundaries at all times

### Ongoing Review

Healthy groups require continuous attention:

- Starting each session with a brief review of group norms
- Promptly addressing concerns or disruptions as they arise
- Noticing and naming positive peer interactions and group progress
- Providing consistent structure and predictability across sessions
- Regularly assessing group dynamics and adjusting as needed

## Group Session Structure

Effective grief group sessions are thoughtfully designed to meet both the emotional, social, and cognitive needs of students. A consistent session structure ensures emotional support, maximizes limited time, and helps students engage meaningfully in each session.

### Essential Components of a Group Session

#### Primary Focus Areas for School-Based Grief Groups

- Provide psychoeducation about grief as a natural process
- Increase awareness of emotions and related behaviors
- Decrease isolation and foster peer support
- Identify and strengthen pre-existing coping skills (family, cultural, personal)
- Allow students to share their grief story if and when they are ready
- Highlight existing support systems inside and outside the group
- End groups in a positive, hopeful way
- Encourage awareness of continuing bonds and healthy remembrance practices

#### Theme and Goal Setting

Include both a theme and a goal to provide focus and purpose.

- The **Theme** offers a broad category that frames the session (e.g., identifying and understanding emotions, memory sharing, coping skills, grieving at school).
- The **Goal** is a specific, actionable outcome—what students will explore, create, or understand by the end of the session.

Clear themes and goals help students feel grounded in the purpose of the session and give facilitators a framework for planning activities. The table below shares some examples:

Theme	Goal
Building peer relationships	To foster a sense of connection and belonging with peers who are grieving
Identifying and expressing feelings	To help participants recognize, name, and express a range of emotions related to their grief.
Creating and preserving memories	To help acknowledge continuing bonds and integrate loss into their identity.
Developing coping strategies	To help identify supportive tools that can be used in daily life.
Understanding the grief process	To help students understand that grief is unique, non-linear, and without a fixed timeline.

### **Check-In and Check-Out Processes**

Transitions into and out of grief group sessions can be emotionally vulnerable moments for students. Establishing consistent check-in and check-out rituals provides structure, supports emotional regulation, and helps students move between the group setting and the school environment with greater ease.

**Check-In** helps students shift their focus from the classroom to the group space. It sets the emotional tone, promotes connection, and allows facilitators to gauge individual and group needs. Check-ins are brief but intentional—grounding students in the present and preparing them to engage.

Examples of effective check-ins:

- Sharing a “brag” and a “bummer” from the past week
- Use a mood scale or weather metaphor to describe current feelings
- Simple connection question that invites participation (e.g., “What’s something that made you smile this week?”)
- Share a color that matches how you’re feeling today
- Share one word about how you’re arriving today (e.g., “tired,” “curious,” “hopeful”)
- Name a song, animal, or object that fits your current mood

**Check-Out** helps close the session with care and intention. It offers students a chance to reflect, regulate their emotions, and mentally prepare to return to academic or social settings.

Examples of effective check-outs:

- Sharing something they are looking forward to in the coming week
- Offer a one-word check-out describing how they’re feeling now
- Name something they’re grateful for or appreciated in the group
- Share one thing you learned or want to remember from today
- Name one coping strategy you plan to try this week
- Offer one encouraging word for the group

### **Relationship Building**

In the early sessions of a grief support group, icebreakers play a key role in building trust and comfort. They ease initial awkwardness, foster connection among participants, and help facilitators establish rapport with students.

Effective icebreakers for grief groups:

- Are brief (5-7 minutes)
- Create comfortable sharing opportunities
- Acknowledge group purpose without diving immediately into grief work
- Gradually build trust and connection over time

The relationship-building component becomes especially important when new members join or after school breaks, helping to reestablish group cohesion.

### **Core Grief Activity and Processing**

At the center of each session is a structured activity paired with thoughtful processing. This component gives students a hands-on way to explore grief-related themes and fosters opportunities for meaning-making through discussion and personal insight.

Activities engage students cognitively and emotionally through creative expression, writing, movement, or discussion. These experiences help make abstract grief concepts more accessible. Effective grief group activities:

- Align clearly with the session's theme and goal
- Offer multiple ways to engage (e.g., verbal, visual, physical)
- Allow for different comfort levels with sharing
- Include clear instructions and a defined purpose

Following the activity, a period of guided reflection helps students process what they experienced and connect it to their personal grief journey. Skilled facilitators support processing by:

- Connecting individual experiences to broader grief concepts
- Validating the wide range of emotions and responses
- Helping students apply insights to their daily lives
- Creating space for exploration, questions, and self-discovery

### **Guided Reflection Example**

Facilitator Prompt (after activity): *"Let's take a few minutes to think about what we just did together. Activities like this can bring up different thoughts and feelings, and it's okay if your experience looks different from someone else's."*

### **Reflection Questions (choose 2–3 based on the group's readiness):**

- What was it like for you to do this activity?
- Did it bring up any thoughts or memories of the person who died?
- Was there something about this activity that felt comforting or helpful?
- Did anything feel challenging or surprising?
- What is one thing you want to take with you from today's activity—maybe a thought, a feeling, or something you created?
- How might what you experienced today help you outside of this group, like at home or at school?



Reminder: *Always prepare a backup activity. Group needs and energy can shift unexpectedly, and flexible facilitation ensures the session remains supportive and productive.*

### **End of Group and Preview**

A thoughtful closing helps reinforce the session's learning and provides a sense of completion. It also builds continuity and keeps students engaged by setting clear expectations for the next meeting. At the end of each session, take a few minutes to:

- Offer a brief preview of the next session's topic or theme
- Share any instructions about materials students may need
- Provide reminders about upcoming schedule or location changes
- Express appreciation for students' participation and contributions

This forward-looking element helps maintain engagement and often improves attendance as students look forward to future activities.

### Recommended Timeframe

While a consistent session structure supports predictability and safety, flexibility is essential. Each group is different—some sessions may require more time for processing and discussion, while others may lean more heavily on activity or connection. The structure guides the session, not restricts it. If time becomes limited, prioritize check-out and preview, as these transitions help ground students and maintain continuity across sessions.

Below is a sample structure for a 60-minute session:

Component	Time Allocation	Purpose
Check-In	5-8 minutes	Transition and connection
Icebreaker	5-7 minutes	Relationship building
Introduction to Topic	3-5 minutes	Frame session focus
Main Activity	10-12 minutes	Core grief work
Processing Discussion	20-30 minutes	Reflection and meaning-making
Check-Out/Preview	5-7 minutes	Grounding and closure

Use this as a flexible guide rather than a rigid schedule—adapt it based on group energy, developmental needs, and what feels most supportive in the moment.

### Session Reflection

Reflecting on each session helps track group progress, guide future planning, and support continuity—especially when multiple facilitators are involved. It can be helpful to include:

- Attendance
- Session focus and activities completed
- Group observations on activities
- Any follow-up needed
- Suggestions for future sessions

This can also support program evaluation and quality improvement over time.

## Excusing Students from Class

An organized, discreet system for excusing students ensures consistent attendance, protects student privacy, and supports school-wide communication, while prioritizing safety and privacy.

### Key Principles

- **Safety:** Always document where students are during group sessions.
- **Privacy:** Use discrete methods that protect student information.
- **Consistency:** Establish predictable routines teachers and students can rely on.
- **Flexibility:** Prepare alternate procedures for schedule changes or school-wide events.
- **Communication:** Keep teachers and key staff informed of timing and expectations without disclosing sensitive information.

## Supplies and Materials

Focus on supplies that are developmentally appropriate, portable, and organized in a way that supports smooth facilitation across sessions and locations.

### Guiding Principles

- **Preparation.** Organize all materials before each session to ensure smooth facilitation
- **Mobility.** Use portable, organized containers for easy transport between locations
- **Developmental Appropriateness.** Select materials that match participants' ages and capabilities

## Essential Supply Categories

### Basic Office Supplies

- Writing tools (pens, pencils, markers)
- Documentation materials (notebooks, journals, index cards)
- Organizational tools (clipboards, sticky notes)

### Art Supplies

- Drawing tools (colored pencils, crayons, markers)
- Paper products (construction paper, cardstock)
- Creative tools (age-appropriate scissors, glue sticks, tape)
- Tactile materials (modeling clay, playdough)

### Comfort Items

- Tissues
- Fidget tools (stress balls, putty)
- Comfort objects (small stuffed animals for younger groups)

### Group Facilitation Materials

- Visual aids (whiteboard or flipchart with markers)
- Time management tools (timer, clock)
- Group activity supplies (talking stick, sharing ball)

## Specialty Materials

### Creative Expression Tools

- Memory work supplies (decorative boxes, jars, photo frames)
- Craft materials (beads, string, decorative elements)
- Storytelling aids (puppets, figurines)

### Resources

- Age-appropriate grief workbooks or journals
- Guided meditation scripts
- Themed storybooks about loss and grief
- Mindfulness activity cards
- Portable speaker

## Evaluation

A simple evaluation helps assess the effectiveness of the group.

### Designing the Evaluation

- Use a variety of question formats: Likert scales, multiple choice, checkboxes, open-ended responses, and visual options (especially for younger students).
- Match evaluation design to the age and developmental level of students:
  - ◊ **Elementary:** Simple language, visual scales (e.g., faces), fewer questions, checkboxes
  - ◊ **Middle/High School:** More complex rating scales, open-ended questions, longer format

### Timing & Administration

- Pre-evaluation: Start of first group session (before any content delivery)
- Post-evaluation: During or immediately after the final session
- Keep evaluations short—ideally under 10 minutes
- Provide quiet activities (e.g., Play-Doh) for early finishers
- Create a supportive evaluation environment.
- Explain the purpose: Help students understand how their responses contribute to program improvement and offer privacy.

### Accessibility & Inclusion

- Read questions aloud when needed
- Offer support for learning differences (e.g. extra time, a scribe, quiet space)
- Provide opportunities to complete missed evaluations

### Data Analysis

- Store data securely, organized by student or group
- Individual review:
  - ◊ Look for emotional or behavioral changes
  - ◊ Note changes in coping, support usage, and academic impact
- Group-level review:
  - ◊ Identify themes and patterns
  - ◊ Measure collective shifts in grief understanding and coping

## Using the Data

Use findings to:

- Refine session content and structure
- Demonstrate program effectiveness to school leadership
- Identify students who may benefit from continued support

## Communication Guide

Strong, compassionate communication with caregivers is key to building trust, encouraging participation, and supporting students throughout the grief group experience. This guide outlines effective messaging strategies for each phase of the group—before it begins, during the program, and after it concludes.

### Best Practices for Tone and Style

- Use clear, accessible language
- Avoid terms that may be confusing to children (e.g. acting out, boundaries, unpacking, etc.)
- Include specific examples and concrete guidance
- Emphasize ongoing support availability
- Use a structure that makes information easy to digest
- Include both practical and emotional support elements

### Avoid:

- Using clinical language
- Making assumptions about the family's grief experience
- Providing too many resources without clear guidance
- Being too formal or distant in tone
- Failing to acknowledge the ongoing nature of grief
- Not providing clear next steps or contact information

### Ongoing Resources

- List ongoing support services in your area and provide clear contact information
  - ◊ Regular support group meetings
  - ◊ Seasonal camps and workshops
  - ◊ Individual counseling sessions
  - ◊ Family support programs
- National resources such as nacg.org
- Include specific programs and opportunities

## Before the Group: Setting the Foundation

**Purpose:** Introduce the group, build caregiver understanding, and invite participation.

**Tone:** Warm, informative, and reassuring

### Key Elements to Include:

- Introduction to the group's purpose (e.g., supporting students grieving a death)
- Overview of what participation involves (timing, setting, facilitator roles)
- Briefly outline the key topics covered
- Highlight the peer support aspect
- Emphasis on emotional support and voluntary participation
- Request for caregiver consent

- Invitation to share anything they would like the facilitators to know about their child's grief experience

#### Sample Language

*"We are preparing to launch a small support group for students who have experienced the death of someone important to them. This group will offer a space for peer connection and learning ways to cope with grief. We believe this will be a meaningful and supportive experience for your child."*

#### During the Group: Maintaining Connection

**Purpose:** Keep caregivers informed, engaged, and supported while the group is running.

**Tone:** Encouraging, collaborative, and respectful of privacy

#### Communication Tips:

- Share a mid-program update
- Provide general feedback on group progress (no individual disclosures)
- Offer strategies families can use to reinforce group themes at home
- Remind caregivers of upcoming sessions or schedule changes
- Encourage open communication if questions or concerns arise

#### Optional Additions:

- Brief summaries of topics being covered (e.g., memory-making, emotional expression)
- Caregiver tip sheets or grief education resources aligned with group content
- Invitations to share observations or ask questions about how their child is doing

#### Sample Language:

*"We're halfway through our grief support group, and the students have been exploring different ways to express their feelings and share memories of the person who died. While we don't share individual updates due to confidentiality, we want you to know your child is participating in meaningful ways, and we continue to be honored to support them."*

#### After the Group: Supporting the Ongoing Journey

**Purpose:** Close the group with appreciation, reinforce key messages, and offer continued support.

**Tone:** Grateful, affirming, and resource-oriented

#### Key Elements to Include:

- Thank caregivers for allowing their child to participate
- Provide a brief summary of group focus areas
- Normalize the ongoing nature of grief
- Share insights about youth grief and ways caregivers can support their child
- Ongoing support beyond the group
  - ◊ **Scheduled Check-Ins:** Invite students to meet once or twice after the group ends for a brief check-in.
  - ◊ **Referral Pathways:** Provide clear information about how to access continued counseling services, either in school or through community resources.
  - ◊ **Student Invitations:** Let students know they can rejoin future groups if offered again, or that you'd be glad to meet if their grief feels stronger at another time.

- ◊ **Resource Reminders:** Share age-appropriate handouts or tip sheets that can be revisited later.
- ◊ **Community Partnerships:** Provide contact details for local grief centers, camps, or online supports so students and families have options outside the school setting.

#### Sample Language:

*"Thank you for allowing [Child's Name] to be part of our grief support group. Over the past few weeks, we explored topics like coping with strong feelings, remembering the people who died, and finding support from others. While the group has ended, your child's grief journey continues—and we remain available to support your family."*

#### Ongoing Resources

- List ongoing support services in your area and provide clear contact information
  - ◊ Regular support group meetings
  - ◊ Seasonal camps and workshops
  - ◊ Individual counseling sessions
  - ◊ Family support programs
- National resources such as nacg.org
- Include specific programs and opportunities

#### Educational Information for Caregivers

- Children adapt to a death over time while continuing to carry their memories. This process and timeline can look different for each child.
- As children grow and develop new understandings about grief, they might experience their grief in different ways at various developmental stages.
- Youth may sometimes feel isolated in their grief experience and might benefit from gentle reassurance their feelings are valid and understood.
- Consider each family member's grief journey can be unique – a parent's experience may differ from their child's. Patience, regular check-ins, and following your child's lead can help foster understanding.
- Connecting with peers who share similar experiences may help youth feel more understood and provide opportunities for expressing their feelings.
- Some youth might process their grief privately and may not always show their feelings openly. This can be a natural part of their journey and doesn't mean they are no longer grieving.
- Avoid phrases like "be strong" or "move on," which may minimize your child's feelings. Gentle acknowledgment of their emotions can help maintain trust and connection.
- Saying the name of the person who died and sharing memories can help them feel less alone in remembering their person.
- Consider allowing your child to take the lead in choosing how they would like to remember the person who died during significant occasions or celebrations.

#### Cultural and Individual Considerations in Grief Groups

When offering grief support groups in schools, it is important to recognize that not all students—or their families—will find group participation or emotional expression beneficial. Grief is experienced and expressed differently across individuals, families, and cultures. Effective facilitation requires flexibility, respect, and cultural humility.

## Guidelines for Practice

### Recognize Individual Differences

- Not all children benefit from verbal emotional expression. Some may prefer private reflection, creative outlets, or simply being present in the group.
- Respect each student's comfort level and offer multiple ways to engage (e.g., art, writing, listening).

### Acknowledge Cultural Beliefs and Practices

- In some cultures, sharing grief experiences outside of the family is discouraged. Others may emphasize collective silence, ritual practices, or private mourning.
- Avoid assumptions; instead, invite families and students to share what feels appropriate for them.
- Consider referring to community or faith-based supports if these align better with the family's cultural or spiritual practices.

### Engage Caregivers Early

- Communicate clearly about the purpose and structure of the group.
- Ask caregivers about cultural or family preferences for talking about grief and memory-making.

### Facilitate with Cultural Humility

- Approach each student with openness and curiosity rather than assumptions about what "should" be helpful.
- Use inclusive language that respects different beliefs about death, grief, and afterlife.
- Be mindful of accessibility needs, neurodiversity, and communication preferences.

# THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR GRIEF GROUPS

As a school-based mental health professional, you already understand the importance of structure and process when working with students. Group support is no different. Successful facilitation benefits from clear models that help explain how groups grow, change, and function over time. Theories of group development and group goals provide a framework for anticipating challenges, setting realistic expectations, and fostering trust among students. Below are evidence-based models and principles to guide your grief support group, based on theories applicable to all group settings.

## Tuckman's Group Theory

Every group goes through natural stages as it grows and develops. Tuckman's theory describes this process as forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. Understanding these stages can help you anticipate the dynamics that may arise and guide your students through them with care. In school-based grief groups, you may see students first looking to you for structure, then testing boundaries, and eventually building trust and connection with each other. By recognizing these predictable phases, you can provide the right balance of guidance, flexibility, and support, while also preparing students for the natural conclusion of the group. These stages are not rigid—groups may move back and forth between them—but they offer a helpful framework for supporting both group process and individual growth.

## Stages of Group Development (Tuckman's Model)

Understanding how groups naturally develop helps facilitators anticipate dynamics and support students at each stage:

1. **Forming** – Students look to leaders for direction; facilitators reduce anxiety and establish goals.
2. **Storming (Power/Control)** – Students may test boundaries or challenge leaders; facilitators help resolve conflicts and establish safety.
3. **Norming (Intimacy)** – Trust builds, rules are embraced, and leadership begins to be shared.
4. **Performing (Differentiation)** – Group members work collaboratively, support one another, and accept differences.
5. **Adjourning** – The group prepares to end through closure rituals, reflection on lessons learned, and acknowledgment of the loss of the group itself.

## Yalom's General Goals of Groups

When facilitating grief support groups with students, it's important to understand not only what happens in a group, but also why those experiences matter. Yalom's research on therapeutic group factors highlights the powerful role of peer connection—how shared experiences, hope, and belonging can foster healing. While support groups are not clinical or therapeutic in nature, these principles still apply, helping students recognize they are not alone, learn new coping strategies by observing others, and feel supported in expressing emotions within a safe, structured setting. The following factors can guide you in fostering growth, resilience, and trust throughout your group work.

## Dr. Yalom's Therapeutic Forces in Groups

- **Instillation of Hope:** Encouragement that recovery is possible by sharing stories and information.
- **Universality:** Recognition of a shared experience and knowing a person's problems are not unique.
- **Imparting of Information:** Teaching about problems and learning factual information about treatment options.
- **Altruism:** Helping and supporting others by experiencing the ability to help another person can build self-esteem. It helps to develop adaptive coping mechanisms.
- **Simulation of the primary family:** Identifying & changing the dysfunctional patterns or roles one played in the primary family.
- **Development of social skills:** Learning new ways to talk about feelings, observations, and concerns.
- **Imitative Behavior:** Modeling another's manners & recovery skills.
- **Interpersonal Learning (modeling, vicarious learning):** Finding out about themselves & others from the group. Yalom also describes 3 important concepts with interpersonal learning:
  - ◊ The importance of interpersonal relationships
  - ◊ The corrective emotional experience
  - ◊ The group is a social microcosm
- **Group Cohesiveness (belonging):** The feeling of belonging to the group, and valuing the group.
- **Catharsis:** The release of emotional tension (e.g., angry outbursts, laughing, etc.). Express emotions in a safe environment.
- **Existential Factors (risk, responsibility):** Learning to take responsibility for one's own actions.

## Challenges Specific to School-Based Groups

Running support groups in schools offers meaningful opportunities for students, but it also comes with real challenges. School schedules are often packed, making it hard to find consistent time and space. Attendance can be unpredictable, especially when students miss class for other commitments or when families are hesitant about participation. Confidentiality can be tricky in a school setting, where students may worry about peers or teachers knowing too much. Facilitators also have to navigate differences in developmental stages, cultural backgrounds, and levels of readiness to share. Naming these challenges openly helps set realistic expectations and allows facilitators to plan thoughtfully so groups can still provide a safe, reliable place for students to connect and feel supported.

Facilitators should be prepared for:

### Premature Termination

While you may schedule the group to run a specific amount of sessions, they sometimes end earlier than their scheduled completion date. Students may move to another school mid-year, or a facilitator's role may change, leaving the group without continuity. These disruptions can make it difficult for students to fully benefit from the group process and can stir up feelings of abandonment or unfinished work.

## Outside Influences

Students' experiences in group are affected by the environment around them. If teachers, peers, or family members do not support participation, students may feel hesitant to attend or to share openly. A lack of understanding about grief can also contribute to stigma or discourage students from engaging.

## Types of Loss

Not all grief looks the same. Facilitators need to be aware that these differences shape how students show up in group.

**Ambiguous grief** is the experience of mourning without certainty or closure, often occurring when someone is alive but emotionally, psychologically, or relationally absent, leaving the loss unclear and ongoing.

**Disenfranchised grief** refers to the experience of grieving a loss that others do not acknowledge or legitimize, which can intensify feelings of loneliness and prevent individuals from receiving needed support.

**Traumatic Loss** is when a death is sudden or violent, combining the pain of loss with symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress. This type of grief can be especially intense, lasting longer than expected and making it difficult for someone to focus, function, or feel connected in everyday life.

**Secondary Losses** are the ripple effects that come after a primary loss, such as the death of someone close to the child. These can include changes in routines, financial security, living arrangements, friendships, or a sense of identity. While the death itself is the central loss, these additional changes can compound grief and create new challenges over time.

**Ongoing Losses.** Grief is rarely a single event. Students may experience new deaths, divorce, or other life changes while in group. These can reopen past grief and create layers of loss that are difficult to untangle in a short-term school-based setting.

## Perceptions of the Group

Some students—or adults around them—may view the group as a “downer” or worry it will make grief worse. Facilitators can counter this by emphasizing the strengths that come from connection, the coping strategies learned, and the value of shared understanding.

## Pressured Meaning-Making

While some students are ready to make sense of their loss, others are not. Pressuring children or adolescents to find meaning too soon can feel invalidating. Facilitators should allow space for where each student is in their grief and avoid rushing the process of sense-making.

## References

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NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR  
CHILDREN'S GRIEF

The **National Alliance for Children's Grief (NACG)** is a nonprofit organization raising awareness about the needs of children and teens who are grieving a death and provides education and resources for anyone who supports them. Our Vision is for no child to have to grieve alone. Visit [childrengrieve.org](http://childrengrieve.org) to find these and other resources.

*Thank you to the following NACG members who contributed to this resource: (Listed alphabetically by last name.)*

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Tina Barrett, Tamarack Grief Resource Center, Missoula, MT  
Lisa Coffey, Orange County Public Schools, Orlando, FL  
Melinda Cruz, Radford University, Radford, VA  
Thomas Demaria, National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, Los Angeles, CA  
Michelle Halm, Grief Connection Space, La Grange, IL  
Capella Hauer, School Social Work Association of America, Gaithersburg, MD  
Christien Lambright, The Children's Room, Boston, MA  
Kate Longenbarger, Gabby's Grief Center, Monroe, MI  
Melissa Lunardini, Help Texts, San Diego, CA  
Evelynn Moon, Good Grief, Princeton, NJ  
Genevieve Nelson, Private Practice, Springfield, MO  
Lucretia Pardinas, The Tristesse Grief Center, Tulsa, OK  
Buffy Peters, Hamilton's Academy of Grief & Loss, Des Moines, IA  
Jessica Porte, Wayfinder Family Co., Carlsbad, CA  
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**The Best Practices for School-Based Support Groups for Bereaved Students is a collaborative project developed between the NACG and the Coalition to Support Grieving Students.** The coalition is a unique collaboration of the leading professional organizations representing classroom teachers, principals, assistant principals, superintendents, school board members, and central office staff, student support personnel, and other school professionals who have come together with a common conviction: grieving students need the support and care of the school community.

The Coalition's purpose is to create and share a set of industry-endorsed resources that empower school communities across America in the ongoing support of their grieving students and we are proud to have collaborated on this resource with this group.



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