Grief Over the Holidays: Educators Can Help Students Cope



All across the nation, Thanksgiving and the December holidays are a special time for families, schools and communities. Everywhere we look, we see signs of celebration. In schools, there may be pageants, food drives, decorations and parties. In stores, we hear familiar music. On the streets, people wish each other happy holidays and talk about getting together with extended family and close friends.

During these times, most of us also think about people we miss, including loved ones who have died. These memories can be especially acute for children and teens who have lost a loved one. They may experience periods of deep sadness, a renewal of their grief, or sudden and unexpected reactions of anger, despair or fear.

These responses may happen the first or second year after a death, or many years later. Educators spend a lot of time with students and are uniquely poised to observe grief responses over time. They can take steps to anticipate challenges. The support and understanding they offer grieving students over the holidays can be especially helpful.

GRIEF TRIGGERS CAN BE STRONG

Grief triggers are sudden reminders of the person who died that cause powerful emotional responses. These can include smells or sounds, hearing a song, participating in a family tradition, or even imagining a lost opportunity such as a holiday dinner with the loved one.

Our holidays are filled with these kinds of reminders, so grief triggers can be frequent and quite strong during these times.

EMOTIONS CAN BE POWERFUL

Grieving children may feel particularly vulnerable when they have grief responses to holiday events. They may isolate themselves from peers or celebrations in an effort to avoid triggers. They may be frustrated or disappointed that they can't manage these responses. It's common for children to feel, "I should be past this and able to stay in control now."

(Continued)

GOALS FOR EDUCATORS

By reaching out to grieving students, educators have an opportunity to promote several important goals, including:

1. **Decreasing the students' sense of isolation.** It's common for grieving children to feel that others do not understand their experience.

2. **Offering students an opportunity to talk.** Students *will* be thinking about their loved one. They will be reflecting on memories, experiences and feelings.

3. **Encouraging students to talk with others.** In most cases, it's helpful for students to talk honestly with peers and family about their thoughts, feelings and memories.

STEPS TO TAKE

- **Ask open-ended questions.** Listen more than talk. For example, ask, "How are the holidays going for you? I wonder what thoughts you've been having about your dad lately."

- **Accept expressions of emotion.** Children may express sadness, pain, frustration, anger or other powerful emotions. Avoid minimizing their feelings or trying to put a "positive" spin on their expressions. For example, saying, "It's important to focus on the good times you had with your dad," is likely to communicate that you don't want to hear a child talk about painful things.

- **Reach out to grieving students at school events.** The absence of a loved one may be especially noticeable during the classroom party or holiday band concert. Make a point to touch base in some way. Let a student know you're happy to see her here at the party, or are looking forward to hearing her play in the concert.

- **Introduce classactivitiesinawaythatacknowledges absences and offers alternatives.**

  For example, if students are making cards for members of their family, invite them, if they wish, to also include cards for someone who is no longer living, or who does not live with the family.

- **Lead class discussions about holiday stories and experiences withsensitivity.**

  Poems, stories and discussions may present triggers for grieving students. Open up the possibility during discussions ("Sometimes people have sad reactions to the holidays because they miss people. Have any of you ever had an experience like this?"). Consider reaching out after class to see how a grieving student is doing, or learn what he or she thought of the discussion.

Children experience grief differently over time. What is true this year for the holidays may not be the same next year. This is why one of the most important things adults can do is ask questions and then listen, with presence and patience.

Learn more about ways to offer support to grieving children and students at the website of the Coalition to Support Grieving Students.