

Peer Support

Take-Home Message

Children who are uninformed or unprepared may unintentionally isolate or tease a classmate after a death. This can worsen the isolation grieving students already feel.

But children naturally want to help their friends. Teachers can equip their students with the skills to support a peer. This can make a profound difference for a grieving student. There is probably no more important lesson or life skill for an educator to teach.

Grieving Students' Relationships With Peers

After the death of a close friend or family member, children are likely to experience a range of confusing and strong feelings, including guilt and shame. They may worry that something is wrong with them, or be embarrassed about being associated with a death. They may worry about their appearance, or expressing too much emotion.

They may not know what to say or how to act, even with their friends. They may withdraw from peers.

When a Peer Experiences a Death

Like adults, children often have limited experience supporting a friend who is grieving. They may be afraid to say or do the wrong thing. The death may create uncertainty in their own lives—"Could my father also die?"

They may make insensitive comments, ask repetitive or detailed questions about the death, or even tease the grieving student. They may distance themselves from the grieving student to cope with their own anxieties.

They may want to say, "I worry my father might also die someday. Can you let me know what the experience is like and help me understand it better so I can prepare myself?"

But what they may say instead is, "Your daddy died. You can't make a Father's Day card!"

Equip Students With Skills

When teachers take the following steps, students are more likely to provide effective support to a grieving peer.

1. Provide information. Help students understand, at a very basic level, what has happened. They will be less likely to burden a grieving peer in the immediate aftermath of a death with repetitive questions.
2. Give students an opportunity to ask questions. Students are likely to have questions about what death is and the effect it has on children and their families. They will want to know how to be helpful to someone who is grieving. Teachers can often discuss this information with a class before the grieving student returns to school. This helps everyone feel more prepared.
3. Provide a safe environment for students to share thoughts and feelings. Invite students to talk about their own losses or the fears they may have about someone in their own life dying.
4. Offer concrete advice and practical suggestions. For example, talk about ways to start a conversation with someone who is grieving. Discuss helpful things to say, and what not to say.

Most of the advice in *Talking With Children and What Not to Say* will also be helpful to students.



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

LEAD FOUNDING MEMBERS



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