INTRODUCTION:

Death is one of the universal social issues that can impact each student on your campus. Approximately 1 in 20 students experience the death of a parent or sibling before age 18.\(^1\) 70% of teachers have a grieving student in their classroom at any given moment.\(^2\)

Grieving students often report that the grown-up who supported them most after a death was a teacher or school counselor.\(^3\) Since children spend more of their waking hours at school than elsewhere it behooves you to prepare yourself to support grieving children in your school setting in the immediate aftermath of a death and in the ensuing months and years.

In spite of the certainty that young people will experience a death, few school personnel feel comfortable talking to a grieving child. Many struggle for language that is age appropriate or does not sound harsh. Some educators wonder if it’s their role to have these discussions. Others lack training to help them feel prepared to support a grieving child. Tragically, many children will grieve alone without adult or peer support.

WHEN A CHILD OR FACULTY MEMBER DIES

In the unfortunate circumstance that a student or faculty member dies, having a detailed plan prepared and in place will empower staff and support students and families during that sensitive time period.

The first step in your plan is to disseminate information to the community. Most schools utilize an email system now and you can have a template ready to use to inform families that a death has occurred. If funeral information is available you can share that with the family’s permission. It is advisable to include information about the cause of the death and suggest that the parents or guardians be truthful with their children, using age-appropriate language.

If your school district has a crisis response team, the members should be equipped to support you in the immediate aftermath of the death. They will help the children process the news of the death and

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\(^1\) “Childhood and Adolescent Bereavement: A Review of the Literature,” Monica Durrette, M.S., Virginia Commonwealth University, Matt Bisko, Ph.D., Virginia Commonwealth University Health Systems, 2009.


triage children who need 1:1 attention. Every death can be considered a tragedy or crisis for the family involved, even if the circumstances of the death are not related to violence.

If you do not have a crisis response team, you can reach out to your local grief support center, family counseling center or create a team of therapists trained in crisis response with children.

For some districts, including Los Angeles Unified School District, OUR HOUSE Grief Support Center collaborates with the crisis response team to provide grief counseling to the children most directly impacted by the death as opposed to those that are reacting to the news but aren’t grieving the end of a relationship they had with the person who died.

Short term grief support groups can offer the griever at your school a chance to express their thoughts and feelings with others their age who have experienced the same loss. The group will also prepare the children to participate in mourning rituals and teach coping strategies to use both in the present and in the ensuing weeks and months.

OUR HOUSE can also provide handouts such as: Explaining Death to Children, Preparing Children for Mourning Rituals, Ways to Support a Grieving Friend and Explaining Homicide (or Suicide or Overdose) to children which can be shared with families and faculty. (See Appendix A with attached handouts, or access them online at http://www.ourhouse-grief.org/grief-pages/support-for-grieving-children/)

A classroom that has experienced the death of a student or teacher also benefits from a one-time visit by a grief specialist who can lead the children in a discussion about the cause, normalize their grief responses, and help them share memories of the person. They can also discuss ways they can support the impacted family members and each other.

Lastly, schools can hold a mourning ritual on campus. Rituals range from “a moment of silence” to a candlelight vigil to a tree or plaque dedication. These rituals offer an opportunity to offer the support of the community as the members start their grieving process. (See Appendix B: with attached handout, Ideas for School Observances)

**COMMON GRIEF RESPONSES**

Children’s grief differs from adult grief in significant ways, leading adults to view the children as “fine” or “over it”. At school they tend to grieve on the inside for fear of being teased or bullied if they show their feelings outwardly. They may act out or somaticize their grief rather than articulate their thoughts and feelings.

They are often confused about the cause of death because an explanation was never given or the death was explained in euphemistic language that may have made it hard to understand the true
nature of the death. Children often lack the life experience to understand death related concepts and take longer before experiencing the full range of emotions that will arise once they can understand that death is permanent and irreversible.

**Children use distraction to cope** and may go through the school day without thinking about the death or the person who died. They may prefer being at school, welcoming the break from the intensity of emotion at home. Respect their need for privacy but make sure they know who they can go to if they need support.

**Children may experience flashbacks or intrusive images** during the school day which interfere with their ability to focus and concentrate on school work. Intense waves of emotion or “grief tsunamis” may come unexpectedly and during inconvenient times like during tests. They may be too tired to concentrate because their sleep might be interrupted or they carry a heavier load of responsibilities at home.

**Children are protective of their bereaved grown-ups** and exhibit caregiving behaviors towards them. They may hide their grief for fear of overwhelming visibly fragile adult family members and siblings.

**Most children do not feel comfortable talking about the death with non-bereaved peers** because others “just don’t understand” or because they are afraid they will cry if they talk about it with friends.

**Children struggle to fit in** and search for peers with whom they can identify. Being different can be acutely painful especially for adolescents. Their grief is another way they are different from peers so they may isolate or may even be shunned because they are “not as fun” as non-bereaved children.

**Since grief typically does surface 7-10 months after the death** and peaks until 2 years have passed, they often find themselves without any support when others consider them to be ‘over it’ and support is withdrawn. (J. William Worden, Harvard Child Bereavement Study)

This suggests the need for both early intervention and on-going support by school counselors for at least two years following the death.

**DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFERENCES:**

**Children and teens will react in age appropriate ways** which are determined by

- their stage of cognitive development (Piaget)
- their stage of psychosocial development (Erickson)
- Their previous history of loss.
Young children who have no prior experience with a death will struggle to understand what death is because they have not reached the stage of cognitive development in which concepts about death can be understood.

Key concepts, including the irreversibility of death, non-functionality (the body has stopped working), causality, unpredictability and universality, are beyond their grasp. They are likely to make false inferences from the information they are given unless it is explained to them in plain, direct language. Students in preschool through kindergarten are characteristically magical thinkers and are also egocentric, so are likely to think they caused the death. This can lead to feelings of guilt or shame.

Elementary school-aged children may exhibit behavioral signs including:

- Regression to prior developmental levels
- anhedonia or a disinterest in normal activities
- trouble concentrating
- increased aggressiveness
- trouble sleeping
- Somatic problems

School-aged children in the developmental stage Piaget calls Concrete Operations have a morbid curiosity about death and are interested in knowing details about what occurred. Truthful answers reduce the fear of the unknown.

Adults who struggle to decide how much to tell children can follow a simple rule: If they are old enough to ask the question they are old enough to hear the answer.

Once a death has occurred the bubble that protects them from death anxiety is burst so they often worry that another family member or they themselves will die.

School-aged children do not have the emotional capacity or the attention span to withstand intense emotions or stay focused on the death for very long. They may appear to be absorbed in play or “be over it” but may just be taking a break from their grief in an effort to self-regulate.

Children of all ages benefit from attendance at wakes, viewings, funerals, and memorials because they acquire information that helps them understand death and attendance allows them to stay in close contact with attachment figures.

Children aged 11 and above can often understand what death means: That it is permanent, irreversible, and universal, but it will take time before they are able to accept the reality that the person has died. It takes time and many small moments and experiences before their brains can accommodate the new information and understand that they won’t be seeing the deceased again.
They may exhibit the same symptoms as younger children including

- separation anxiety
- irritability
- Somatic problems.
- academic problems
- trouble eating or sleeping

**Teen-aged grievers also tend towards egocentricity and magical thinking** so may also struggle with guilt. Now, in the developmental stage Piaget calls Formal Operations they can understand death fully and are capable of thinking about it in abstract ways.

Their brains have not reached full development, however, so they can’t think or make decisions at an adult level. The brain structure of those who experience repeated traumas may be altered to the point that they are ruled by its more primitive centers. These teens can exhibit poor impulse control and poor judgement, have trouble concentrating and may have difficulty navigating relationships.

“Magical Thinking” might take one the following two forms and might cause them to engage in behaviors that are dangerous to themselves or others:

- “I’ll live forever, I’m invincible”
- “I’ll die by age 25 anyways so ‘why not’”

**Monitor for Depression, Anxiety and PTSD in addition to the grief.**

If it’s a peer or sibling that has died this can challenge a teen’s sense of identity and immortality even more. They may wonder if they are still a brother or sister or if their role in the family will be permanently altered.

The teen’s ability to complete the separation-individuation process may be impacted by the death of a parent leading to ambivalence and increased interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict. They will always remain the child of the person who died rather than developing a relationship with their parent as an adult.

**Erickson’s Developmental task of Identity vs. Role Confusion is also impacted after a death.** The teen will struggle to fit in and may not feel they can share their grief for fear of being different.

They may have to assume adult roles which get in the way of other age-appropriate activities.

**CULTURAL AND FAMILIAL DIFFERENCES IN BELIEFS ABOUT THE AFTERLIFE.**

Grief and mourning rituals differ across cultures, religions and families. Each family member will grieve in their own way. It would not be possible for you to learn all the variations of mourning rituals that
might be practiced in the population you serve, so try and remain sensitive to cultural differences that might exist between yourself and your grieving student. Even the language that people use when talking about death varies from culture to culture and person to person.

If your campus would like to hold a mourning ritual do it with the grieving family’s permission.

WHAT CAN YOU DO WITH YOUR NEWFOUND UNDERSTANDING OF CHILDREN’S GRIEF?

1. **Determine if you or someone else will be the one to support the child at school.** Following a funeral or memorial service held at school the students should be offered the chance to speak 1:1 with school personnel if they experience “grief tsunamis” or waves of grief.

   Counselors can offer a safe haven where kids can share their feelings, read grief related books, draw pictures and memories about the person who died.

   Offer the student an opportunity to **draw**: What happened in your family or at school; where is the person who died now; what happened at the funeral, or just draw a memory of something you used to do together.

   Sometimes just being there to listen is the best intervention you can offer.

2. **Determine if the child and family want you to break the news to the student body.** Counselors can identify the child’s wishes and either assist with informing their classmates about the death or refrain from doing so.

   With the family’s consent, counselors can also share information about a funeral or memorial.

3. **A death can reawaken feelings about other losses you or your students may have experienced.** If a student begins to show signs of depression it may be unresolved grief over previous losses surfacing now because of the current death.

4. **Make sure that no one is grieving alone.** If there is a student without friends, pay attention and notify that student’s guardians or family that you are concerned. Offer referrals as needed.

5. **Remember that grief is a life-long process.** When a child’s parent or sibling dies, make sure to enter that information in their permanent record so they will continue to receive the support they need. Birthdays, anniversaries and holidays are difficult times for grieving students but grief can be triggered or resurface at any time.

6. **Identify grief resources in the community that you can offer as referrals to a newly bereaved family.** These might include websites or support groups at places like OUR HOUSE Grief Support
Center and national resources like Camp Erin, Camp Comfort Zone and the National Alliance for Grieving Children.

**IN THE CLASSROOM, TEACHERS CAN:**

- Provide accurate information to students when a grieving child is absent in the days following the death, with permission from the family
- Lead classroom discussion about death and allow children to express their thoughts and feelings in the safety of their peers
- Utilize another staff member, if a teacher feels unprepared or unable to talk about death or what happened in their community
- Dispel rumors: sometimes what they imagine happened might be worse than the reality
- Model responses including tears if appropriate
- Be flexible: set aside curriculum if necessary for brief periods but maintain structure and expectations as much as possible
- Suggest ways they can cope with their feelings after school
- Offer breaks: if a child is having trouble paying attention or completing his work it may be helpful to offer them a short break to speak in private to members of the counseling faculty. Tutors may be helpful or necessary

**TOP COPING STRATEGIES FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS WHO ARE GRIEVING INCLUDE:**

Exercising, listening to their favorite music, talking with a friend or adult they trust, taking breaks from grieving to watch a funny movie or play a game. Journaling or drawing are also good ways to express feelings.

**IDEAS FOR SCHOOL OBSERVANCES:**

- **Attend mourning rituals when possible**: Kids find the presence of teachers & peers at mourning rituals to be very comforting
- **Assemble handmade cards** into a book to present to the child or family
- **Watch for signs of teasing or bullying**. Grieving children are often targeted because they appear more fragile or different
- **Hold a candle light memorial** on school grounds, with the family’s permission and participation
- **Plant a tree**
- **Create and hang a memorial plaque** or a memorial bulletin board where kids can place notes, photos, memories, or messages for the deceased; place in the hall, library, classroom or other school location
- **Decorate** the person’s chair, desk or locker
- **Help them during holiday and other special observances**. For Mother’s Day, for example, discuss what they will do on that day and what they’d like to do with classroom projects
IN CONCLUSION:

At the end of a long day at school, some of these same support activities may be soothing to you and help you to feel rested and restored so you can come back to work the next day and do what you do best.

For additional information, consultation or support when your community is impacted by a death, contact OUR HOUSE Grief Support Center at 888-417-1444 or www.OurHouse-grief.org.

Appendix


