



NATIONAL CENTER FOR  
School Crisis & Bereavement



# Supporting the grieving student

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**[www.cincinnatichildrens.org/school-crisis](http://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/school-crisis)**

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# Loss is common in the lives of children

- Vast majority of children experience the death of a family member and/or friend by the time they complete high school
- 5% of children experience death of parent by 16
- It is highly likely you see a grieving child every day in school, even if you don't see any children grieving

# Families may not notify you

## Children may not appear to be grieving

- Adults may communicate death is not discussed
- Children may
  - not yet understand what has happened or its implications
  - be overwhelmed by feelings
  - express grief indirectly through behavior or play
- Children may still keep their losses private

# Being with someone in distress

- Do not try to “cheer up” survivors
- Do not encourage to be strong or cover emotions
- Express feelings and demonstrate empathy
- Avoid statements such as: “I know exactly what you are going through” (you can’t), “You must be angry” (don’t tell person how to feel), “Both my parents died when I was your age” (don’t compete for sympathy)
- Allow child/family to be upset and tolerate unpleasant affect, without trying to change it. Accept reactions while suspending judgment –  
intervene only when safety/health is concern

# Children's guilt

- Thought processes limited by:
  - Egocentrism
  - Limited understanding of causality
  - Magical thinking
- Results in guilt
  - Reassure children of lack of responsibility

# Misconceptions & literal misinterpretations

- For young children, thought processes are concrete and literal
- Religious explanations can be shared, but should not be only explanation of death

# www.nylgriefguide.com

## After a Loved One Dies— How Children Grieve

And how parents and other  
adults can support them



### What's Covered in this Guide

- Helping children, helping the family
- Why a parent's role is important
- Helping children understand death
- How children respond to death
- Attending funerals and memorials
- Helping children cope over time
- Getting help
- Taking care of yourself
- Looking to the future

[Click on the Grief Guide link on the left navigation bar to order product](#)

# Children and Bereavement:

## How Teachers and Schools Can Help

Presented by the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

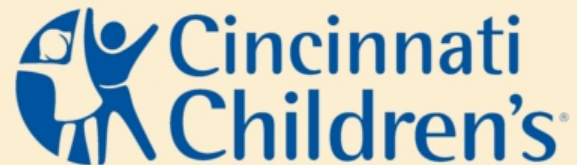
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# Four concepts about death

1. Death is irreversible
2. All life functions end completely at the time of death
3. Everything that is alive eventually dies
4. There are physical reasons someone dies

# Death is irreversible

- Children may view death as temporary separation
- Adults may reinforce this belief

*Understanding this concept allows children to begin to mourn*

# **All life functions end completely at the time of death**

Children may worry that the person who died is

- In pain
- Hungry or thirsty
- Afraid
- Sad
- Lonely

*Understanding this concept helps children  
understand that the person who died is not  
suffering*

# Everything that is alive eventually dies

- Children may believe they and their loved ones will never die
- They may be confused about why this death occurred
- Misunderstanding leads to guilt and shame

*Understanding this concept makes it less likely that children will associate death with guilt and shame*

# There are physical reasons someone dies.

- If children don't understand the real reason a person died, they are more likely to create explanations that cause guilt or shame
- Adults can help children understand the physical cause of death:
  - ~ Use brief, simple language
  - ~ Avoid graphic details

***Understanding this concept helps children minimize feelings of guilt and shame***

# Adolescent bereavement

- Adults assume that because adolescents have ability to think rationally they need no further explanations
- They assume since adolescents often less amenable to adult guidance, they do not need support
- In reality, adolescents do, but often left unsupported
- Parents often rely on adolescent children to provide comfort and take on adult responsibilities
- Importance of interviewing child alone and need for adult to obtain support so as not to depend on child

# Provide advice on how to support child

- Funeral attendance
- Be aware of community resources and offer them to families
- Provide follow-up – remember that grieving is long-term

# Death and secondary loss

- Changed relationships
- Move after a death
- Change in lifestyle
- Change in peer group



# Death and secondary loss

*(continued)*

- Loss of shared memories
- Change in plans for the future
- Decreased sense of security and safety

# Helpful responses for triggers

- Provide a safe space or adult the child can talk to
- Set procedures for the child to obtain support
- Let the child call a parent or family member if needed
- Provide permission and encouragement to see school nurse or counselor
- Offer private time with teacher to talk about feelings

# **When to make referrals to outside services**

- Continued school problems
- Aggression or other severe problem behaviors
- Excessive guilt
- Apathy or depression

# When to make referrals to outside services

*(continued)*



- Social withdrawal and isolation
- Self-destructive behaviors
- Suicidal talk or behaviors

# Importance of professional self-care

- Recognize it is distressing to be with children who are in distress
- It's critical staff find ways to have their own personal needs met and appreciate and address impact of supporting children who are grieving or traumatized
- Create a culture where:
  - it is ok to be upset
  - members normalize asking for help and model willingness to accept assistance
  - people see the benefit of supporting children

# Commemorative activities in schools

- Process of honoring and preserving the memory of what is important to us that has been lost
- Children and adults may have very different needs
- Teaching children in school about important and relevant events is the best way to demonstrate that education and schools are important and relevant
- Commemorative events give children opportunity to express and cope with difficult feelings, realize they are not alone in having fears/concerns, and draw on support of caring community

# Planning commemorative activities

- A commemorative event planned by adults for children is more likely to be helpful to adults
- Simple and symbolic acts are often more meaningful and helpful than formal commemorative events

# Special circumstances: Student suicide

- Clarify information to disclose about cause of death
- Identify students at greatest risk, especially students with shared experiences, who may have know plan, or who may become scapegoats
- Educate about warning signs and symptoms
- Encourage students to seek help (and not to “keep secret” when someone else is at risk)
- While acknowledging individual who died, avoid glamorizing suicide
- Minimize media coverage
- Monitor closely for suicides in community



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Current support: New York Life Foundation

- Promote appreciation of role schools can serve to support students, staff, and families at times of crisis and loss
- Enhance training in professional education programs
- Serve as resource for information, training materials, consultation and technical assistance – provided at no charge to schools
- **[www.cincinnatichildrens.org/school-crisis](http://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/school-crisis)**



# Partial list of NCSCB resources

- Parent guide on supporting a grieving child (New York Life Foundation)
- Guidelines for addressing death of student or staff in school (separate guidelines for suicide)
- Scholastic webinar
- Psychological first aid
- Guidance on addressing anniversary of crisis in school setting
- Guidance document for school security staff