



GRIEF IN SCHOOLS

Lost & Found Grief Center

RESOURCES FOR HELPERS WORKING WITH
CHILDREN AND TEENS IN SCHOOLS



Lost & Found
grief center

GRIEF IN SCHOOLS

Dear Educator,

We want to begin by sharing our condolences. Using these resources means that the unthinkable has occurred in your school community, and now as the helper, you are tasked to help pick up the pieces while moving forward. That is an overwhelming responsibility and we thank you for all you do to support your students and staff each and every day. It is a weight that many educators carry when faced with grief and loss in schools and while you are wondering the words to use, the support to offer, and the procedures you will follow; we also encourage you to take time to process for yourself. While holding space for others, remember to give yourself grace, listen to what you need, and reach out for help when needed. We hope these resources offer some direction, encouragement, and support to you and your school community because no one should grieve alone.

*Sincerely,
Lost & Found Grief Center*



Lost & Found
grief center

GRIEF IN SCHOOLS

RESOURCES INCLUDED:

1. HOW TO HELP GRIEVING STUDENTS IN THE SCHOOL SETTING
2. WHAT GRIEF LOOKS LIKE IN CHILDREN
3. 10 THINGS CHILDREN WHO ARE GRIEVING WANT YOU TO KNOW
4. BACK-TO-SCHOOL AND GRIEF TRIGGERS FOR STUDENTS
5. HELPING STUDENTS WHO ARE GRIEVING HANDLE THE HOLIDAYS
6. INFORMING A STUDENT AT SCHOOL ABOUT A DEATH
7. DO'S AND DON'TS FOR PEERS
8. DO'S AND DON'TS FOR HELPERS
9. SHOULD CHILDREN ATTEND A FUNERAL OR MEMORIAL?
10. THE BILL OF RIGHTS OF GRIEVING TEENS
11. CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES FOR PROCESSING GRIEF



Lost & Found
grief center



HOW TO HELP GRIEVING STUDENTS IN THE SCHOOL SETTING

Don't Shy Away from the Conversation

- Ask about their loved one. Ask for stories or favorite memories. Speaking the loved one's name is a powerful gift.

Remind Them: There's No Wrong Way to Grieve

- There's no finish line for when they should be "done" grieving. Even siblings who experience the death of the same person will grieve differently.

Be Mindful of Your Words--Language Matters

- Use concrete terms like "dead" and "died," especially with younger children. Avoid phrases like "lost" or "passed on," which can cause confusion.
- Avoid pacifying phrases such as, "at least they're in a better place now," or "at least you still have..." These phrases feel disconnecting or as though they are somehow grieving incorrectly.

When Referencing a Suicide Death

- Do not use the phrase, "committed suicide." This phrase can imply sin or crime, compounding the shame or guilt those grieving often place upon themselves. The preferred phrase is "died by suicide."

Remember Grief Can Impact Behaviors & Academic Performance

- Sleeping, eating and regulating emotions are difficult, so grades, extracurricular activities, and social events may feel overwhelming.

Check in with Students Around Important Dates

- Major life events (milestone birthdays, graduation, etc.) often trigger new waves of grief.
- Help students identify their best supports and help create a plan to use them for specific difficult days ahead.

Acknowledge New Anxieties

- Many grieving teens carry new anxieties after a death (food, shelter, finances, younger siblings and surviving parents). What other ripple-effect losses has your student experienced? Examples may include changing schools, loss of home, changing guardianship, discontinued traditions, questioning spiritual beliefs and disconnection from extended family.

Encourage Healthy Coping Skills

- The more tools students have in their toolbox, the greater resilience they will have through the unexpected waves of grief. Examples: journaling, exercise, expressive arts, music, and mindfulness.

Offer Choices Whenever Possible

- The death of an immediate family member creates a great deal of change that students have no control over. Providing opportunities for choice and control, however small, will help ease anxiety.

Normalize Contradicting Emotions

- Many griever report feeling guilty when they first laugh or smile after the death, as if the feeling of happiness nullifies their grief or dishonors their loved one. Remind them their feelings are valid and that both joy and sadness can be true.
- If you are unsure of what to say to a grieving student, a helpful statement may be, "I don't know if there is something I can say to ease your hurt, but I am happy to listen and sit with you. Can you tell me more about your loved one?"

*No one should
grieve alone!*



What Grief Looks Like in Children

Typical signs of grief in children:

- Children move in and out of grief. They grieve in “spurts.” They may appear sad and tearful, followed by periods of play. This is normal.
- Children often ask the same questions over and over about the death. They have not forgotten, but they need to hear it again to try to understand something which is so unreal to them.
- Children often feel unsafe and express fears. Being afraid of the dark, fears of sleeping alone, worrying about other “bad things” happening are all normal. Adults need to provide extra reassurance instead of dismissing these fears.
- Young children may fantasize about the return of the person or talk about when they return as a part of their inability to understand “gone forever.” Adults should patiently explain that the person is dead, which means they will not come back again.
- Because they lack the vocabulary to explain their feelings, children often express their grief through the following behaviors:
 - Anger
 - Acting out or ignoring rules.
 - Feeling sick-tummy aches, headaches
 - Not sleeping well
 - Lack of confidence
 - Death play. Play is the work of children, so they may re-enact funeral rituals or what they have heard about the death.
 - Difficulty concentrating
 - Changes in academic performance—some become perfectionists; others may fail

Signs of concern that warrant an assessment or evaluation for counseling:

- Chronic headache, tummy ache, or other physical symptoms –going on for months.
- Continued refusal to accept the reality of the death.
- On-going problems with eating or sleeping.
- Threats or preoccupation with self-harm. It is not unusual for children to say, “I wish I could die so I can see my mom/dad again.” This is rarely a threat of harm, but just their means of expressing how much they miss the person.
- Isolation, deliberate avoidance of or refusal to be with other children their age.
- Continued loss of interest in activities that were previously enjoyed.
- Development of obsessive tendencies that reveal anxiety and an inability to engage in normal childhood activities.



10

Things Children Who Are Grieving Want You to Know

#1 Children who are grieving want to be told the truth.

Tell children who are grieving the truth with these considerations in mind:

- The age of the child
- The maturity level of the child
- The circumstances surrounding the death
- Answer questions honestly as you can

#2 Children who are grieving want to be reassured that there will always be someone to take care of them.

- Children who are grieving spend a lot of time worrying that another person in their life might die.
- To help alleviate this fear, it's important to reassure them that there will always be someone in their life who will take care of them.
- Enlist the aid of their parent or caregiver to determine a plan for the children. Let the children know the plan.

#3 Children who are grieving want you to know that their grief is long-lasting.

- Children will grieve the person who died for the rest of their life.
- Children who are grieving don't "just get over it".
- They will often be bewildered when other people in their life have seemed to move on.
- Their grief changes over time as they grow and change over time.

#4 Children often cope with grief and loss through play.

- Children grieve through play.
- Typically, they cannot sustain prolonged grief.
- Children use play as a way to cope with their grief and to take a break from their grief.

#5 Children who are grieving want you to know that they will always miss the person who died.

- People die, but love doesn't die.
- Children who are grieving will miss the person who died for as long as they live.

#6 Often, children who are grieving want to share their story and talk about the person who died.

- Having an opportunity to tell his or her story is often beneficial to a child's healing process.
- Sharing memories about the person who died is also very important.
- Children who are grieving don't want to forget the person who died—they are also worried that others will forget their person.

#7 Every child grieves differently.

- Every child has his or her own grief journey and own way of grieving.
- Some children might be more expressive with their grief.
- Some children might keep it all in.
- Siblings grieve differently. Just because children come from the same family doesn't mean that their grief will be the same.
- It is important to honor each child's story, even if it is different than his or her sibling's story.

#8 Grieving children often feel guilty.

- Grieving children will often feel pangs of guilt. Even if the guilt is not justified and has no basis in reality.

#9 Even though I might be acting out, what I'm really feeling is intense emotions of grief.

- Grieving children frequently feel sad, angry, confused, or scared.
- Since they might not know how to express all of these emotions, they often end up acting out instead.

#10 If you're not sure what a grieving child wants, just ask!

- When in doubt, ask a grieving child how you can help.
- Check in with the child – do they want to talk about the person who died? Maybe not.
- Expect myriad answers.
- Do they want to write about their grief or do some other activity to express their grief?
- What do they need?

You can help grieving children by:

- Listening
- Really hearing them when you're listening
- Following their lead
- Validating their feelings
- Answering their questions
- Seeking out additional resources, as needed

Used with permission from:



WRITTEN BY: PAMELA GABBAY, M.A., FT PROGRAM
DIRECTOR
THE MOURNING STAR CENTER FOR GRIEVING
CHILDREN AND TEENS CAMP DIRECTOR, CAMP ERIN
(760) 836-0360 WWW.MOURNINGSTAR.ORG

417.865.9998
1555 S. GLENSTONE
SPRINGFIELD, MO 65804



Lost & Found
grief center





Back-to-School Grief Triggers for Students

Many of the routines and rituals of returning to school after summer break create grief triggers for students grieving the death of someone close to them.

Back-to-school routines that can become grief triggers:

- Checking “deceased” on enrollment cards
- Watching other children being walked to their rooms by a mom or dad when theirs is missing
- Questions about family & family activities during the summer
- Being asked to tell/write about fun summer activities (their summer may have been full of sadness)
- Forms & letters addressed to Mom & Dad
- Requests/requirements for parents to sign a syllabus or checklist
- Back-to-school shopping (without a now deceased parent)
- Morning & evening routines are different at home (without a now deceased parent)

What can school staff do to help?

- Be aware of these triggers and provide additional support & understanding
- Let students know their response is normal.
- Provide extra individual attention and support.
- Provide alternatives.
- Allow extra time for adjusting to new routines.
- Let the student know you understand things are different and difficult for him and invite him to talk to you about struggles whenever needed.
- Check in with these students more frequently to show support and encourage them to share feelings.
- Establish a communication plan with parents/caregivers (see also "Going Back to School Routines").



10

Tips for Helping Children Who Are Grieving Handle the Holidays

- #1** The first holidays following the death of a loved one are usually the hardest due to the traditions that surround holidays. Sometimes the anticipation of the day is worse than the actual day, but planning ahead is important.
- #2** Even though children can experience very intense grief emotions on a holiday, they may be able to put their grief aside and be very excited. This is the normal in childhood grief.
- #3** The magic of the holidays is usually more exciting for children than for adults. Children still need holiday fun and family traditions, but don't try to act as if no one is missing.
- #4** Family traditions do not have to be celebrated exactly as you've always done them. They can still be meaningful but less painful with small modifications.
- #5** Talk to your children about what they would like to do for the holidays. Get their ideas about what to change and how to commemorate the memory of the person who is gone. Talking & planning ahead helps everyone.
- #6** Simple ceremonies such as lighting a candle in memory of the person or hanging a special angel on the tree can be very meaningful.
- #7** Don't be afraid to talk about the person who died; share some holiday memories about them. This process can be sad and painful, but it can also lead to happy memories and even laughter.
- #8** Let your children know you may not be in the best physical or emotional condition, that day. Explain that if you are upset, angry or sad, it is not because of anything they did, grief bursts can come at anytime.
- #9** Do not put too many demands on yourself or your children for the day. Your energy is limited because of grief, so this may be the year to scale back.
- #10** If you don't like the changes you made this year, evaluate & try something different the following year.





Informing a Student at School About a Death

Often students are in school when a family member calls the school or comes to school to get the student to deliver the sad news that someone in their family has died. The school counselor is usually assigned the job of summoning the student. At Lost & Found, many children describe a long, dread-filled walk alone from their classroom to the counselor's office, feeling something bad is about to happen and wondering the entire walk, what the bad thing will be. Others see a family member's car or someone from their family in the office as they make that walk, creating more dread and anxiety.

A few tips to make the situation better:

- The counselor or principal should meet with the family member who has arrived to tell the child. Spend a few moments getting the facts and helping the adult gain some composure before going for the student.
- Ask the adult if he/she needs help talking to the child. Provide resources about talking to children about death to help prepare the adult for questions the child may have. The adult may be in shock and not capable of reading or comprehending. You can provide a few, brief tips if it seems appropriate.
- Offer to stay with the adult while the conversation informing the child occurs, if the adult would like that support. Be sure to get a phone number to call for follow-up information and support.
- Let the adult know that sometimes children initially have little or no reaction to such shocking news. Sometimes they may fall apart and later have very difficult question. Explain the lack of comprehension and emotion that often accompanies shock.
- Have the counselor or a familiar, comforting adult go to the child's classroom to walk them to the office. A reassuring touch and casual conversation can help ease the anxiety.
- Make sure the car of a family member or a police car is out of site of the student as you make that walk.
- Take the child to the counselor's office, where the child and family member are shielded from the view of others.
- Stay with the family while the child is informed. Help with any questions the child may ask.
- Let the family know you have resources that can help provide guidance about helping children deal with a death, the funeral etc.
- Reassure the child that you are available in the coming days and will be available when he/she returns to school.
- Walk the family to the outside door or to their car, helping shield them from awkward questions or interactions with others.
- Follow-up with the family in the coming days.



Dos and Don'ts of Peers

Children and teens are less prepared to offer support to their peers, leading to feelings of isolation and inadequacy among the bereaved. Below, you will find some dos and don'ts of peers while you navigate support in your community.

Do

- If you have them, share good memories of the person who died with the student who is grieving.
- Quietly express support by simply acknowledging the death and showing understanding. You can also offer support by creating a card, picture, or words of support.
- Remember that life is different now for the student, so you may see their demeanor change from what you're used to. They will be experiencing a lot of different emotions all at once, so be patient with them.
- Allow your peer to process at their own pace. They might want to talk to you about their grief, or sit quietly. It is up to them, so follow their lead.
- "I am sorry", "I am here for you", "tell me about your person", or "I am here to listen if you need to talk" are all examples of supportive language to use with grieving classmates and peers.

Don't

- Don't ask questions about the death or how the death occurred. If they want to share details, they will share, but there might be many questions they do not have the answers to.
- Don't share or spread rumors about the death.
- Don't say, "I know how you feel". Grief is an individual experience and it is different for all of us.
- Don't avoid the student or avoid conversation with them. They are still your classmate, peer, or friend. They are processing big emotions and need the support through their grief journey.
- Don't feel like you need to cheer them up or make them laugh if/when they are crying. It is okay to sit quietly while they are expressing big emotions. Grief isn't something you can fix.



Dos and Don'ts of Helpers

A death in a school community can provide unique opportunities for growth and life-long lessons on how to provide support to students who are grieving. Below, you will find some dos and don'ts of helpers while you navigate support through grief.

Do

- Be present with them. Listen and know that your presence can be a comfort.
- Offer space for them to talk, or sit quietly if that is what is needed.
- Follow their lead. If they want to talk and process, they will. Sitting quietly is always an option when processing grief.
- Acknowledge the difficulty of grief, and assure them of your support.
- Trust the process of the school community procedures in your building. Reach out to appropriate staff members for additional support.
- Take care of yourself, listen to your needs, and reach out for help when needed.

Don't

- Don't minimize emotional pain that might come up. Students might share other instances of grief in their life, acknowledge the pain they are experiencing. Example: the death of a pet or grandparent.
- Don't assume that all students will process grief in the same way. Grief is an individual experience.
- Don't ask too many questions. Let the students process in their own time.
- Don't share clichés to offer support. These include, "they are in a better place" or "they would want us to be strong". These comments can create guilt while minimizing their grief and their openness to process.
- Don't share your personal beliefs, practices, or religious affiliations with students and their grieving process.



Should Children Attend a Funeral or Memorial Service?

Children should be given a choice about whether or not they want to attend a funeral or memorial service, but they must be given enough information to make that choice.

- Explain everything that will happen at the funeral or memorial service. Remember, the entire experience will be new to a child, and there are many customs that can seem very weird.
- Let the child know that it will be sad, and there may be many adults who cry. Seeing adults cry can be unsettling to children, so reassure them that crying is normal when we miss someone, and everyone will be okay. Reassure the child that it is okay if he/she cries.
- Assure the child that you or another familiar adult (family member, close adult friend, etc.) will be there with them at all times.
- Give the child an opportunity to participate in the service if he/she would like to. Ideas for participation include:
 - Placing a special article, note, or flower in the casket or displaying it beside a photo.
 - Sharing special memories that can be read by someone else at the service.
 - Being an honorary pallbearer.
 - If the child is old enough, he/she may want to participate in the service by singing a special song, reading something special, or sharing favorite memories. **If the child wants to do this, adults should provide a great deal of assistance and practice.**
 - Children find releasing balloons at the end of the service to be very meaningful and a special way to end the service. Note: please ensure all balloons are environmentally friendly and do not have strings.

If the child decides to attend the service:

- Ensure a caring adult is with him/her at all times to comfort, reassure, and answer questions. If possible, the adult should be someone who will not be overcome emotionally and can hear and answer the child's questions.
- If the child becomes too uncomfortable or emotional, he/she should be taken out of the service. Do not make him/her to feel bad about not being able to stay. Let the child know ahead of time it's okay to leave the service.
- After the service, talk to the child about what he/she saw, questions he has or things he did not understand.



The Bill of Rights of Grieving Teens

A grieving teen has the right....

- ...to know the truth about the death, the deceased, and the circumstances.
- ...to have questions answered honestly.
- ...to be heard with dignity and respect.
- ...to be silent and not tell you her/his grief emotions and thoughts.
- ...to not agree with your perceptions and conclusions.
- ...to see the person who died and the place of the death.
- ...to grieve any way she/he wants without hurting self or others.
- ...to feel all the feelings and to think all the thoughts of his/her own unique grief.
- ...to not have to follow the "Stages of Grief" as outlined in a high school health book.
- ...to grieve in one's own unique, individual way without censorship.
- ...to be angry at death, at the person who died, at God, at self, and at others.
- ...to have his/her own theological and philosophical beliefs about life and death.
- ...to be involved in the decisions about the rituals related to the death.
- ...to not be taken advantage of in this vulnerable mourning condition and circumstances.
- ...to have guilt about how he/she could have intervened to stop the death.



This Bill of Rights was developed by participating teens at The Dougy Center and does not represent "official" policies of the Center.

*No one should
grieve alone!*



Classroom Activities For Processing Grief

Provide paper and writing supplies for cards or banners to give to the family once complete

- Always optional.
- Collect all cards when done so you are able to monitor what was written and you're able to give them to the family.
- May need to provide some guidance on what words would show support and remain sensitive to the loss.
- Banners could be a good alternative for larger classrooms.

Create a space in the classroom for students to circle up and share good memories or favorite, positive stories of the person who died

- Sharing is always optional.
- An adult must be present to monitor the processing and offer support.
- Be mindful of students who may need additional support with an appropriate staff member, whether that is the school counselor or another staff member.

Use bubbles to promote breathing techniques and a sense of calm

- Provide individual bubble containers to students to demonstrate how to take deep breaths to practice breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth when overwhelmed with big feelings.
- Encourage students to watch the bubbles as they float down to the ground to promote a sense of calm.
- Very helpful for preparing for transitions back to class or to the next activity.

Provide sensory items to promote calm, safety, and trauma-informed techniques

- Playdough, clay, or Kinetic Sand
- Coloring pages and supplies
- Fidget tools (Fidget spinners, Rubik's cube, Bendy Sticks, Magna tiles)



Lost & Found
grief center

Additional Grief Resources

Book List

Elementary

- The Rabbit Listened by Cori Doerrfeld
- What Does Grief Feel Like? by Korie Leigh
- Happy-Sad Today by Lory Britain
- The Goodbye Book by Todd Parr
- Lost in The Clouds by Tom Tin-Disbury
- Always Remember by Cece Meng

Secondary

- Hello Grief by Alessandra Olanow

Adults

- Finding Meaning by David Kessler
- The AfterGrief by Hope Edelman
- When People Grieve by Paula D'Arcy

Online Resources

www.lostandfoundozarks.com

www.dougy.org
(several free resources in English and Spanish)

www.NACG.org

www.judishouse.org

417.865.9998
1555 S. GLENSTONE
SPRINGFIELD, MO 65804

