



HELPING TEACHERS UNDERSTAND A GRIEVING CHILD

*Creating a Supportive School Environment After a
Student Experiences a Death*

Teachers often spend many hours each day with a grieving child and may notice changes that are not visible at home. A teacher does not need to become the child's counselor. A calm, informed, flexible response can help the student feel understood while maintaining the structure and belonging that school provides.

GRIEF CAN ENTER THE CLASSROOM IN MANY FORMS

A grieving student may appear distracted, tired, irritable, unusually quiet, perfectionistic, restless, tearful, or seemingly unaffected. Concentration and memory may temporarily change. Some children work hard to hold emotions together at school and release them only after returning home.

WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE

- Changes in academic performance, organization, participation, attendance, or behavior.
- Increased visits to the nurse, requests to call home, or difficulty with separation.
- Strong reactions to books, lessons, holidays, family projects, emergency drills, or conversations about illness and death.

GENTLE REMINDER

A grieving student may need support without wanting attention. Whenever possible, offer accommodations privately and preserve the child's sense of belonging in the classroom.

CREATE A PRIVATE SUPPORT PLAN

Ask the family and student what information may be shared and with whom. Identify a trusted staff member and a discreet signal or pass the student can use when they need a break. Avoid requiring the child to explain their grief publicly.

WORDS THAT CAN HELP

A teacher might say privately, "I am glad you are here. I know things may feel different right now." "If you need a break, use this signal." "You do not have to talk about the death with me, but you can if you want to." Simple acknowledgment is often better than avoiding the loss entirely.

BALANCE FLEXIBILITY WITH ROUTINE

Predictable classroom expectations can feel stabilizing. At the same time, temporary flexibility with workload, deadlines, testing, participation, or homework may be appropriate. Support should be individualized and reviewed as the child's needs change.





BE AWARE OF GRIEF TRIGGERS

Mother's Day, Father's Day, family-tree projects, autobiographical assignments, health units, literature involving death, and school celebrations can unexpectedly activate grief. When possible, give the student advance notice and provide alternatives without making them feel different or excluded.

COMMUNICATE WITH CAREGIVERS

- Brief, respectful communication can help adults identify patterns. Share observations rather than interpretations: "She has had trouble concentrating after lunch this week" is more useful than "She is not coping well." Protect the student's privacy and follow school policies.
- REMEMBERING DEVELOPMENT MATTERS
- A student's grief needs may change over months and years. New academic content and developmental milestones can give an old loss new meaning. School transitions may also bring renewed grief when the child realizes the person who died will not be present.

A THOUGHT TO CARRY WITH YOU

One compassionate teacher cannot remove a child's grief, but can help make school a place where the child does not have to carry it alone.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What changes have you noticed in the student's learning, relationships, behavior, or sense of safety? What small classroom adjustment might reduce pressure while preserving belonging?

WHEN MORE SUPPORT MAY HELP

Follow school procedures when concerns involve persistent decline, severe distress, safety, self-harm, suicidal statements, traumatic reactions, or significant impairment. Coordinate with caregivers and appropriate school or mental-health professionals.

A GENTLE CLOSING

A teacher's steady presence can matter greatly. The student does not need every adult to become a grief expert. They need adults who notice, listen, protect dignity, allow reasonable flexibility, and continue to see the whole child - not only the loss.

What changes have you noticed in the student's learning, relationships, behavior, or sense of safety?
What small classroom adjustment might reduce pressure while preserving belonging?

