



# RETURNING TO SCHOOL AFTER SOMEONE DIES

*Helping a Grieving Child Re-enter the Classroom  
and Daily Routine*

Returning to school after a death can provide welcome routine, connection, and normalcy, but it can also be exhausting. A grieving child may worry about questions from classmates, falling behind, becoming emotional in class, or leaving home after another person has died. Thoughtful planning between family and school can make the transition gentler.

## BEFORE THE CHILD RETURNS

Whenever possible, contact the school before the child's first day back. Decide what the teacher and appropriate staff need to know, what the child wants classmates to know, and who the child can go to if grief becomes overwhelming during the day.

## WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE

- Difficulty concentrating, remembering instructions, completing work, or staying organized.
- Tears, irritability, fatigue, physical complaints, withdrawal, or needing more breaks.
- Worry about leaving surviving family members or checking repeatedly that they are safe.

## GENTLE REMINDER

A grieving child's ability to concentrate may temporarily change. Support and reasonable flexibility can be more helpful than assuming a sudden academic struggle reflects lack of effort.

## CREATE A SIMPLE SCHOOL PLAN

**Identify one trusted adult at school and a discreet way for the child to request a break. Consider temporary flexibility with assignments, testing, homework, attendance, or deadlines when needed. The goal is support without making the child feel singled out.**

## WORDS THAT CAN HELP

**Tell the child, "You do not have to explain everything to everyone." "We can decide together what your teacher knows." "If you feel overwhelmed, here is who you can go to." A child may also benefit from a simple response for peers: "Someone in my family died, and I don't really want to talk about it right now."**

## CONCENTRATION MAY BE DIFFERENT

Grief can consume attention and energy. A child may read the same paragraph repeatedly, forget familiar material, or struggle with tasks that were previously easy. This does not necessarily mean the child has lost ability. Short-term academic flexibility can give the brain room to adjust.





### PEERS CAN HELP - AND SOMETIMES HURT

Classmates may be caring, awkward, curious, silent, or unintentionally insensitive. Ask the child what they want others to know. School staff can help set expectations around privacy and respectful behavior without making the child the center of attention.

### KEEP COMMUNICATION OPEN

- A brief family-school check-in can identify patterns that are not visible in one setting. The child may appear fine at school and fall apart at home, or the reverse. Sharing observations can help adults understand the full picture.
- REMEMBERING DEVELOPMENT MATTERS
- School challenges may reappear around anniversaries, assignments about family, parent events, graduations, performances, or transitions to a new grade. A child who no longer needs accommodations today may need support again later.

### A THOUGHT TO CARRY WITH YOU

The goal is not to make school grief-free. It is to make school a place where grief can be carried safely while the child continues learning and belonging.

### A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

**What part of returning to school worries this child most - academics, peers, separation, questions, or becoming emotional? Who at school can become their safe person?**

### WHEN MORE SUPPORT MAY HELP

**If school avoidance, academic decline, anxiety, behavior changes, or emotional distress remain significant or worsen, families can consult school support staff and an appropriate qualified mental-health professional.**

### A GENTLE CLOSING

**School can become an important part of rebuilding daily life after loss. A flexible plan, one dependable adult, respectful communication, and permission to have difficult moments can help a child return without having to pretend that nothing happened.**

What part of returning to school worries this child most - academics, peers, separation, questions, or becoming emotional? Who at school can become their safe person?

