



GRIEVING THE DEATH OF A FRIEND OR CLASSMATE

*Supporting a Child When Someone Their Own Age
Dies*

The death of a friend or classmate can be especially difficult for a child to understand. Children often expect death to happen to older people, so the death of someone their own age may challenge their sense of safety and fairness. The loss may affect friendships, school routines, activities, and the child's understanding of their own mortality.

WHY THIS LOSS CAN FEEL DIFFERENT

A peer may have been part of the child's everyday world - sitting nearby in class, playing on the same team, sharing lunch, texting, riding the bus, or planning future activities. The child's grief may be shaped by both the relationship and the sudden absence from familiar places.

WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE

- Questions about whether the same thing could happen to them or another friend.
- Difficulty returning to school, a classroom, team, club, or place strongly connected with the person who died.
- Sadness, fear, anger, guilt, numbness, curiosity, or concern about how other friends are coping.

GENTLE REMINDER

Do not measure the importance of a child's loss by how long the friendship lasted or how adults viewed the relationship. Let the child tell you what the person meant to them.

LET THE CHILD DEFINE THE RELATIONSHIP

Adults may not know how important a friendship was. Avoid minimizing the loss because the children were young, had known each other only briefly, or were not considered "best friends." Ask what the person meant to the child and listen to the answer.

WORDS THAT CAN HELP

Try: "It makes sense that school feels different without him there." "You can tell me what you miss about her." "You may have lots of different feelings, or you may not know what you feel yet." "Nothing you thought or said caused this death."

HELP WITH FEARS ABOUT THEIR OWN SAFETY

When someone the same age dies, children may suddenly feel vulnerable. Give truthful, age-appropriate information about what happened without making impossible promises. Correct misunderstandings and explain what adults are doing to keep children safe when relevant.





NAVIGATING SCHOOL AND PEER GRIEF

Children may encounter memorials, announcements, empty desks, social media posts, conversations, and classmates grieving differently. Remind the child that there is no single correct reaction. Help them decide what they want to share and when they need a break.

REMEMBERING THE FRIEND OR CLASSMATE

A child may want to write a note, create art, attend a memorial, keep a photograph, wear a meaningful item, participate in a school remembrance, or privately remember the person. Offer options without requiring public participation.

REMEMBERING DEVELOPMENT MATTERS

A child's understanding of a peer's death can deepen over time. Later milestones may bring renewed grief when the child realizes the friend is absent from graduation, sports, birthdays, or other experiences they expected to share.

A THOUGHT TO CARRY WITH YOU

When a friend dies, a child may be grieving both the person and the belief that young people are always safe from death.

A MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

What part of the child's everyday life was connected to this friend or classmate? Where are they most likely to feel the absence?

WHEN MORE SUPPORT MAY HELP

Seek additional support if the child develops persistent or worsening anxiety, school avoidance, traumatic reactions, significant changes in functioning, self-harm, or statements about wanting to die. Immediate safety concerns require urgent help.

A GENTLE CLOSING

The death of a young person can change the way a child sees the world. Honest information, patient listening, school support, and permission to remember in their own way can help them carry both the friendship and the loss.

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