
CRISIS: HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH GRIEF AND LOSS

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clarification of the information presented. Loss and death are both part of the cycle of life that children need to understand.

- *Encourage children to ask questions about loss and death: Adults need to be less anxious about not knowing all the answers. Treat questions with respect and a willingness to help children find their own answers.*
- *Don't assume that children always grieve in an orderly or predictable way: We all grieve in different ways and there is no one correct way for people to move through the grieving process.*
- *Let children know that you really want to understand what they are feeling or what they need: Sometimes children are upset but they cannot tell us what will be helpful. Giving them the time and encouragement to share their feelings with us may enable them to*

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Tips for Children and Teens With Grieving Friends and Classmates

Seeing a friend try to cope with a loss may scare or upset children who have had little or no experience with death and grieving. Here are some suggestions teachers and parents can provide to children and youth to deal with this secondary loss:

- Help clarify understanding death, particularly with younger children.
- Reassure children that their own families are safe. Seeing their classmates' reactions to loss may bring about some fears of losing their own parents or siblings. For children who have experienced their own loss (previous death of a parent, grandparent, sibling), observing the grief of a friend can bring back painful memories. These children are at greater risk for developing more serious stress reactions and should be given extra support as needed.
- Provide children with age-appropriate guidance for supporting their peers. Children and many adults need help in communicating condolence or comfort messages. Help them decide what to say ("Steve, I am so sorry about your father. I know you will miss him very much. Let me know if I can help you with your paper route.") and what to expect.
- Help children anticipate some changes in friends' behavior. It is important that children understand that their grieving friends may act differently, may withdraw from their friends for a while, or might seem angry or very sad, but that this does not mean a lasting change in their relationship.
- Explain to children that their friendship may be an important source of support for friends and classmates. Even normal social activities such as inviting a friend over to play, going to the park, playing sports, watching a movie, or a trip to the mall may offer a much needed distraction and sense of connection and normality.
- Provide concrete actions children may take to help them deal with their fears and concerns. Children need to have some options for providing support. Suggest making cards, drawings, or helping with chores or homework. Older teens might offer to help the family with some shopping, cleaning, errands, or with babysitting for younger children.
- Encourage children who are worried about a friend to talk to a caring adult. This can help alleviate their own concerns or potential sense of responsibility for making their friend feel better. Children may also share important information about a friend who is at risk of more serious grief reactions.

Summary

At times of severe stress, such as the trauma of a natural disaster or the terrorist attacks on our country, both children and adults need extra support. Parents and teachers need to be alert to children in their care who may be reacting to a friend's loss of a loved one. These children will need some extra support to help them deal with the sense of frustration and helplessness that many people are feeling at this time. Children closest to a tragedy may very well experience the most dramatic feelings of fear, anxiety, and loss. They may have personally lost a loved one or know of friends and schoolmates who have been devastated by a loss. Adults need to carefully observe these children for signs of traumatic stress, depression, or even suicidal thinking, and seek professional help when necessary.

Resources

Grieving and Traumatized Children

- Gootman, M. E. (1994). *When a friend dies: A book for teens about grieving and healing*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit. ISBN: 0915793660.
- Greenlee, S. (1992). *When someone dies*. Atlanta: Peachtree. ISBN: 1561450448. (For ages 9–12.)
- Wofelt, A. (2001). *Healing your grieving heart for kids*. Ft. Collins, CO: Companion. ISBN: 1879651270.

Caregivers

- Deaton, R. L., & Berkan, W.A. (1995). *Planning and managing death issues in the schools: A handbook*. Westport, CT: Greenwood. ISBN: 0313295255.
- Webb, N. B. (1993). *Helping bereaved children: A handbook for practitioners*. New York: Guilford. ASIN: 0898621305.
- Wofelt, A. (1983). *Helping children cope with grief*. Bristol, PA: Accelerated Development. ISBN: 0915202395.
- Wofelt, A. (1997). *Healing the bereaved child: Grief gardening, growth through grief and other touchstones for caregivers*. Ft. Collins, CO: Companion. ISBN: 1879651106.
- Worden, J. W. (1996). *Children and grief: When a parent dies*. New York: Guilford. ISBN: 1572307463.

Websites

- National Association of School Psychologists—www.nasponline.org.
Resources to help identify symptoms of severe stress and grief reactions.
- Mister Rogers Website—www.misterrogers.org
See booklet, *Grieving for Children*, for ages 4–10.

This handout is adapted from an earlier version posted on the National Association of School Psychologists website in September 2001. Scott Poland, EdD, NCSP, is Director of Psychological Services for the Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District in Houston, TX, and is a member of NASP's National Emergency Assistance Team. Katherine C. Cowan is Director of Marketing and Communications for NASP. Ted Feinberg, EdD, NCSP, is the Assistant Executive Director at NASP and is a member of NASP's National Emergency Assistance Team.

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The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) offers a wide variety of free or low cost online resources to parents, teachers, and others working with children and youth through the NASP website