



How to support your grieving student(s)

Understanding the Challenges Grieving Students May Experience at School

Grieving students may demonstrate a variety of behaviors while at school. They might:

- Have difficulty focusing and concentrating on their school work
- Withdraw from contact with friends and classmates
- Walk out of class
- Cry during class
- Fall asleep during class
- Neglect their personal hygiene
- Become argumentative with friends, classmates, and possibly teachers or other school staff
- Display angry outbursts
- Not want to come to school or regularly arrive late
- Have frequent visits to the nurse
- Select a new group of friends
- Withdraw from extra-curricular activities that they were involved in before the death.
- Talk much less or much more

School can often be a comforting place for grieving students, as it provides structure, routine, and regular access to their friends, but sometimes school can also be a stressful place for grieving students. Although many classmates prove to be helpful and supportive, others might:

- Avoid a grieving student because they are not sure what to say or do around them
- Ask them lots of inappropriate questions about the death
- Give them unhelpful and unsolicited advice
- Tease them or bully them
- Try to provide false reassurance
- Tell them to smile, cheer up, or not feel sad
- Criticize or judge them
- Urge them to talk and share feelings before they are ready

It is important for teachers and other staff to be aware of how classmates are relating to the grieving student, and work with them in private to respond more appropriately and sensitively.

Although there is no single, foolproof method for helping a student through this difficult time, the following suggestions may be helpful. Following camps are available throughout the Chicago area this summer for children, teens and families who are grieving the death of a loved one. If you are interested, please call the camp contact directly for more information and to register.



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Have a plan with the Grieving Student, The Family, School Staff, and Classmates Before the Student Returns to School

- If possible, meet with the grieving student before he/she returns to school to help the grieving student identify what he or she dreads most about returning to class after the death of a loved one. Find out what the student would like you to tell the class about his or her loss. Prepare the student that sometimes friends/classmates may feel uncomfortable or awkward and say nothing, or they may say insensitive remarks. Ask the student if he/she has any initial ideas about how he/she would like to be supported at school. Let the student know you are always available to listen.
- Call the family of the grieving student and offer condolences, ask about funeral arrangements, and find out what they would like the school to be told about the death. Offer the family an in-school meeting to address any concerns they may have.
- Talk with other staff about how to support the student when he/she returns. Establish an effective communication system to convey concerns with one another about the student. Also, designate where the student should go when in distress, who the point-person should be, for both the student and the family, and what to do if that person is not available.
- Educate the grieving student's classroom on what he or she may be experiencing; offer suggestions on how to relate to the student; and give specific examples of what to say and not to say. (See handout on Educating Students on How to Support Grieving Classmates). Encourage the classroom to send letters or condolence cards to the family.

After the Student Returns to School:

- Let the grieving student know you are available to listen and ask, once again, how he/she would like to be supported at school. Never force a student to talk.
- Stick to a normal school day routine, but modify homework, tests, and projects, and give a grieving student an incomplete, rather than a failing grade.
- Set up a Safe Room where the student can go to safely process their feelings of grief, which could be a nurse's office, a counselor's office or another private room. Establish a private sign or signal with the student so that they may quickly retreat to that room, if needed.
- Keep in communication with the student's family periodically throughout the year.
- Anticipate grief triggers, including anniversary dates, birthdays, special holidays and curriculum topics.
- Provide additional outside resources for the grieving student/family as needed.



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