

Suggestions For Teachers

When A Child Has Had A Loved One Die

Responding to the needs of a grieving child means “being there.” It is important to let go of our adult expectations and try to understand those of the child. Listening is more important than guiding and advising. Stick with the facts and answer questions grieving children have as directly, simply, and honestly as possible. Answer only what the question is asking. The following suggestions may be of assistance to you in working with a grieving student.

DO

1. Use a normal voice and use the words “dead”, “dying”, “death”, etc. Avoid euphemisms that soften the truth, such as “went away” or “passed on,” unless those are the words of the child.
2. Be aware that a grieving child is often not well rested.
3. Set aside time to talk with the child when he/she returns to school. Use the name of the person who died.
4. Let the child ask questions and reflect the questions back. For example, “I hear you say you are wondering why your loved one died.” It is more supportive to allow a child the space to ask questions, instead of coming up with an answer.
5. Encourage the child to express his/her feelings.
Accept each feeling and reaction as being valid.
6. Be patient. Children process information at a different rate than adults. Children may bring up the subject again and again as they try to accept and learn to live with what has happened.
7. Offer appropriate warmth, affection and the assurance of your physical presence.
8. Be sensitive to the child’s age and level of understanding. Children may lack the words to express their thoughts and feelings.
9. Be aware of the resurfacing of grief feelings around the holiday times, anniversaries, the birthday of the person who died or the death anniversary. Keep a log of significant dates for the students in your classroom.
10. Remember that a teacher’s body language gives a returning bereaved student messages, too. Poor eye contact, a distant nod, or a façade of cheerfulness may send a message to the student that, “You are different, unacceptable, alone, etc.”
11. Returning to school after being absent due to the death of a person close to the student is a very important step for a child. It signals the return to “more normal living”. It is important to help allay any concerns about being behind in schoolwork.
12. Once a child shares his/her feelings and thoughts about death to you, it is important that you ask permission from the child before sharing personal information with others.
13. Your presence and the school setting help to provide order, security and some stability in the child’s life. There will be a lot of changes taking place in the home.

DON'T

1. Don’t say, “I know how you feel.” It is possible to relate to a child’s feelings and situation, but don’t take over those feelings. If you have a similar experience, sharing it with the student can be positive.
2. Don’t shut out the child who wants to talk.
3. Do not tell the child how he/she should feel and do not push empty reassurances on the child.
4. No matter how well intended, teachers should not impose their own religious beliefs on students when answering questions. If a child expresses religious ideas about death, it is important to respect them.
5. Know your own limitations and comfort level! Telling the child that you will be available to listen in the future will not leave the child with feelings of abandonment.
6. Don’t try to do too much by yourself. Feel free to seek advice from others, such as a school counselor on how to deal with death related issues or connect the child with another staff member who knows him/her, or to an agency or organization that might be helpful in assisting in the grief process.