

# How to help... A grieving child

## In the Classroom

Grades  
Teasing  
Be flexible  
Guidance  
Teachers  
Change  
Counselors  
Have a plan  
School  
Friends  
Homework  
classroom  
Support  
Listen



**FERNSIDE**

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SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND  
FAMILIES THROUGH GRIEF

Annually, 1 in 10 children will experience the death of a close family member. Are you prepared to deal with a child in your classroom who is grieving?

**D**ealing with death is not easy. It is probably something you would not have pictured yourself and your class having to face. This booklet is designed to give teachers and other school personnel facts about how children grieve and to offer practical classroom interventions that are helpful to the grieving students and their fellow classmates.

Students will look to you for acknowledgment, assurance and guidance. They will need your support while they reestablish themselves at home and in the classroom. Addressing feelings of grief is important to the mental health of your students and the eventual return to their normal routine in school.

**Counselors**

**Grief**  
Have a

# What We Have Learned About Grieving Children

**R**emember that each child's grief is unique. Every child has different concerns, questions, feelings and grieving styles.

Their grief can be influenced by the cause of death, their relationship to the person who died, their history of losses and additional stressors in their lives.

Changes at home will affect the child at school. Be aware of secondary losses:

- a move
- a new school
- added responsibilities
- a change in finances

## Things to note:

*Children grieve according to their developmental age.*

*Children feel more vulnerable...who is going to die next? Me? My mom?*

*Children often feel responsible for the death.*

*Children may experience diminished self-esteem.*

*Children experience a decrease in their ability to concentrate.*

Grief is  
unique

plan

Teachers

# Preschoolers

**M**ay have misconceptions about the death. Preschoolers believe that death is reversible, that people come back to life. They also believe that the dead body functions as if it were alive.

May show some regressive behaviors, for example, bed-wetting, thumb-sucking, baby talk, clinging, etc.

May experience separation anxiety.  
May have difficulty going to school and sleeping in their own bed.

“My teachers were nice to me.”

Be present

Change

Support

He

# Elementary School Children

“I just wanted my teacher to say that she knows how sad I am.”

**A**re beginning to understand the permanence of death and that the dead person is not coming back.

Are concerned with security issues. Who will die next? What will happen to me if someone else in my family dies?

May feel responsible for the death. Some children believe they may have caused the death because they misbehaved, they argued with the deceased, etc.

May not be eating or sleeping well which can contribute to changes in behavior.

Guidance

Friends

Reassure

# Middle School Children

**R**ealize the impact the death has on their family/friends as well as themselves.

Can grasp the significance of religious and cultural rituals. Some find comfort in their beliefs while others may experience a crisis of faith.

Recognize how different they are from their peer group since the death. They may become concerned with “fitting in” following a death.

“I liked it when my teachers came to my Dad’s funeral. I was like, Wow. I didn’t know you cared so much.”

“I have trouble in school when we read stories about people who die.”

Listen  
Reassure

Guidance

Homework

# High School Children

“The teachers, once I actually went back to school...just really helped me to stay focused and on track as much as possible.”

**U**nderstand death and the ramifications the loss has on their family and others, now and for the future.

May adopt role changes within the family - caretaker, disciplinarian.

May question spiritual beliefs and think about their own mortality.

May avoid grief to fit in with peers.

May exhibit a change in risk-taking behaviors - become risk-takers or will be more risk adverse.

classroom

Friends

Grief

# What Can You Do?

**G**rieving students need to express their feelings with a trusted adult and may turn to you. You can respond by:

- Listening with respect to their story.
- Listening without judgment. Know your comfort level with issues of death and dying.
- Being flexible. Allow the child time to catch up with his/her work, by reworking deadlines, etc.
- Allowing the child some options in the classroom. For example, using signals if they need to leave the classroom.
- Being sensitive to special days – Mother’s Day, Holidays, Senior Night, etc.
- Keeping in mind that peer relationships may change after a death. Some friendships struggle while others are strengthened. Grieving children may also experience teasing. Intervene when necessary.
- Keeping communication open with the family.
- Involving the school counselor with the child and family if possible.
- Referring to outside support groups or counseling if needed.



# Keep in Mind

- There is no time limit on grief.
- Children will grieve sporadically. They may focus on the loss for periods of time and other times seem unaffected.
- Children/adolescents may show physical symptoms of grief – headache, stomachache, etc. They may also take on the symptoms of their deceased loved one if that person had been ill.
- As children reach new developmental stages, they can reprocess their grief.
- Siblings may react differently to the death.

## **Some additional quotes from our kids:**

*Since the death my biggest concern is...*

*“How my future will turn out.”*

*“If I will die at the same age.”*

*“Will my mom ever be as happy as she was.”*

Support

Grief

Have a plan

School

### **Kids liked it when they heard:**

“I know that you are sad. It’s OK to cry.”

“I’m ready to listen when you’re ready to talk.”

“I can’t know how you feel, but I had a death in my family...” (If you feel comfortable sharing a personal experience, the student may respond very positively and a degree of trust may develop.)

“I can’t know how you feel, but I want to help you in any way that I can.”

“We can set up a signal system. If you need to leave the class, just let me know.”

### **KIDS didn’t respond well when they heard:**

“You’ll get over it in time.”

“We don’t have time to talk about Jim’s brother, we have to get back to work.”

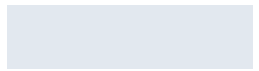
“It’s been four months now. You should be over it.”

“You shouldn’t be this angry. Being angry won’t bring your father back.”

Be flexib  
**Listen**

**Fernside** is a non-profit organization offering support and advocacy to grieving families who have experienced a death. Fernside offers peer support for grieving families – children, teens and adults. Fernside works to increase community awareness of grief issues through community outreach.

Fernside, established in 1986 as the nation's second oldest children's grief center, remains today a national leader in providing grief support services, outreach and education to the community. Fernside is an affiliate of Hospice of Cincinnati. All Fernside services are offered free of charge.



**Classroom**

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**FERNside**

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To learn more about our  
free services or to make a  
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