SUPPORT STRATEGIES FOR EDUCATORS OF CHILDREN EXPERIENCING GRIEF
# Table of Contents

Introduction .................................................................................................................................................... 1
The Educator’s Role ........................................................................................................................................ 2
  Acknowledge Students’ Loss and Grief ......................................................................................................... 3
  Provide Academic Accommodations ........................................................................................................... 7
  Collaborate with Families and Consider Cultural Differences ................................................................. 9
When to Refer a Student to a Professional and Advice from the First Book Network ............................... 12
  When to Refer ............................................................................................................................................... 12
  Advice from the First Book Network .......................................................................................................... 13
Collective Grief ............................................................................................................................................... 16
Appendix ......................................................................................................................................................... 19
  What Is Grief? ............................................................................................................................................... 20
  Definitions .................................................................................................................................................. 21
  Grief Reactions by Age and Development ............................................................................................... 22
  Additional Resources ................................................................................................................................. 25
Introduction

In recent research made possible by the New York Life Foundation,* educators reported they often lack an official protocol for supporting grieving children, though the frequency of childhood grief has increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This resource is designed to address that need by providing:

- Specific ways educators can help grieving students
- Recommendations for academic support and accommodations
- Best practices for family engagement and cultural considerations
- Guidance on when to refer students to a professional
- Advice from school counselors, psychologists, and social workers
- An introduction to collective grief and suggestions about how educators can respond

*New York Life Foundation and American Federation of Teachers Grief in Schools Survey (2020)

GRIEF & COVID-19

Deaths from COVID-19 are highlighting familiar health-related inequities: Black, Hispanic, Latino, American Indian, and Alaska Native communities are suffering a disproportionate number of COVID-19 deaths as a result of persistent disparities in life expectancy and mortality.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022)

In New York Life Foundation’s State of Grief Report: COVID-19’s Impact on Bereavement Support in America, parents reported a greater awareness of death as a result of COVID-19 and a desire for grief support services to come from their child’s school:

- 62% of parents agree that they feel their children are much more aware of death as a result of COVID-19.
- 69% of parents agree they think grief support should be a priority for schools.
- 71% of parents agree that they think schools should give parents more information and guidance on how to help their kids through traumatic events.
- 61% of parents agree that the pandemic has opened their eyes to the need for more grief support services in school.


1 in 13 children in the U.S. will experience the death of a parent or sibling by age 18.

Source: Childhood Bereavement Estimation Model (CBEM) | Judi’s House (2022)
One in 13 children will lose a parent before age 18, and the rate of loss is increasing because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent studies have found that over 200,000 children in the U.S. have lost a parent or grandparent during the pandemic. All educators will have a grieving student in their classroom or program at some point, but many teachers feel unprepared to provide appropriate support. A 2020 study by the American Federation of Teachers and New York Life Foundation revealed that only 13% of classroom teachers have received any bereavement training, up from 7% in 2012. In the same survey, 93% reported that childhood grief was a serious problem that deserved more attention from schools.

Sources: New York Life Foundation and American Federation of Teachers (2020) & Imperial College London (2022)

Children who have experienced the death of a loved one may hide their feelings at home because they do not want to upset their family members who are also grieving. They may hide their grief from their friends as well because they are embarrassed or sense their friends may not know how to provide sympathy and support. As an educator, you have a unique and important role in providing a safe space for students to share their feelings if they choose to do so. As a trusted adult, you can touch the lives of grieving children in a meaningful way, and your actions can have a lifelong impact. In fact, caring and supportive educators are considered a protective factor—along with a supportive family and other caregivers, a caring community, positive role models, healthy coping skills, and peer support—when it comes to helping kids avoid serious mental health problems that can result from grief.

Source: Childhood Bereavement Estimation Model (CBEM) | Judi’s House (2022)
If your school or district has a bereavement protocol in place, become familiar with the recommendations and guidance about supporting grieving students in your classroom or program. If you do not have access to this type of support, here are the most important actions you can take to support bereaved children:

1. Acknowledge their loss and their grief.
2. Provide academic accommodations if needed.
3. Collaborate and maintain an open dialogue with families, school support staff, and classroom teachers.

When you have a grieving student in your classroom, follow these steps to make sure they receive the emotional, social, and academic support they need to feel safe and supported.

**Acknowledge Students’ Loss and Grief**

There are some things to avoid saying when supporting a grieving student, and uncertainty about what to say (and how and when) is understandable. In general, the best approach is to do and say something, and the worst approach is to do and say nothing. Students may interpret your silence as indifference, which could make them feel awkward and alone. Remember, students are distressed by their loss, not by your compassion or willingness to listen to their feelings and experiences.
SILENCE SPEAKS VOLUMES

Saying nothing because you do not want to cause additional distress is an understandable reaction. But silence may communicate more than you realize or intend. Students may make assumptions, such as:

• You consider death a taboo subject, and it should not be discussed.
• You are insensitive to or unaware of the fact they are confused and sad.
• You do not care about something so significant in their lives.
• You do not think your support will help, which younger children may interpret as meaning there is no way for them to feel better.

*It may be hard to reach out, but it is much harder for a grieving student to initiate the conversation.*

Source: National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

COMMON CONCERNS AND HELPFUL TRUTHS

**Common Worries Reported by Educators:**

**Saying the wrong thing and making things worse**

**Truths about Grief and Grieving:**

Although what you say *is* important, the most important thing is to acknowledge the loss, express sympathy, and offer support.

**Showing emotion, tearing up, or crying**

Although children will not benefit from seeing you completely overcome by emotion, most students will appreciate your empathetic and authentic response.

**Uncertainty about whether the student wants to talk about their loss**

Some students will not want to talk about their loss, at least not right away. But even these students will appreciate that you acknowledged their pain and offered to be there for them, if and when they are ready to talk.

**Key Point:** You, as an educator, can have a positive effect on a student’s experience of grief by responding to their loss with care and consideration. If you accompany a student on their journey through grief and loss, your kindness and presence at a painful time will have a lasting impact.
WE CAN’T EXPECT CHILDREN TO LEARN HOW TO EXPRESS OR COPE WITH DIFFICULT FEELINGS IF WE DON’T EXPRESS ANY FEELINGS OURSELVES
David J. Schonfeld, MD, National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

**HOW TO HELP A GRIEVING STUDENT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Do</strong></th>
<th><strong>Don’t</strong></th>
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</table>
| • Acknowledge their loss and their grief.  
• Listen, observe, and ask questions.  
• Normalize common grief reactions.  
• Speak to them privately.  
• Speak from a place of compassion and nonjudgment.  
• Be genuine and honest.  
• Maintain contact and check in. | • Say nothing or ignore what happened.  
• Try to cheer them up, or say you know exactly how they feel.  
• Make comparisons to your own experiences with loss and grief.  
• Encourage or reward them for suppressing their emotions.  
• Bring public attention to their grief or loss without their permission.  
• Suggest they have grieved long enough.  
• Use statements with “At least…” (At least you still have your mother, at least they didn’t suffer, and so on) |

**Key Point:** Although there are important do’s and don’ts around supporting a grieving child, appropriate sympathy and support offered by a caring adult will rarely makes things worse.

Source: Coalition to Support Grieving Students: Talking with Children and What Not to Say
It can be hard to find the right words around grief and loss. Use these statements and questions as a starting point.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of…</th>
<th>Try…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I know how you feel.”</td>
<td>I can only imagine how difficult this must be.” OR “How do you feel?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I felt like that when my friend died.”</td>
<td>“I realize this must be very painful for you.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Your grandmother was a wonderful person.” (If you did not actually know their grandmother.)</td>
<td>“I remember you wrote about your grandma in our family tree assignment.” OR “What are some of your favorite memories of your grandma?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You must be so angry.”</td>
<td>“I noticed you slammed the door/pushed your friend. Are you feeling angry?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It’s going to be OK.”</td>
<td>“I’m here for you whenever you want to share a feeling or memory or have a question or need support.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Do you want to talk about something else?”</td>
<td>“I’m sorry for your loss and am here to support you and listen to your experience.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Everything will be OK.”</td>
<td>“In time, you will get through this.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from David J Schonfeld, MD (Coalition to Support Grieving Students)

If you say something you regret to a grieving student, try to learn from the experience and try not to feel guilty. You did your best at the time, and “children hear our concern more than they hear our exact words.” – David Schonfeld, MD
ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS & BEST PRACTICE

Holidays and other reminders:

Since grief is not a finite process, you may have students in your class who are vulnerable to grief triggers even if they lost a loved one years ago. The following events, environments, and experiences may be grief triggers for some students:

- Holidays, including Mother’s Day & Father’s Day
- Graduations and other transitions, such as moving, going to college, or getting a first job
- Things that may not be meaningful to anyone but the student, such as songs, movies, topics discussed in class, being asked to provide parental permission for field trips, and significant birthdays and anniversaries
- Public tragedies or deaths that remind the student of their loss

Funerals and memorial services:

If you receive an invitation to attend a funeral or memorial, it shows the family values your role in their child’s life, and you should attend if possible. Your presence demonstrates that your school or program community cares and also signals that you, and other school personnel who attend the service, are people the student can rely on and confide in. A student may feel more comfortable reaching out later for support, knowing that you cared enough to be present at a significant moment in their life.

Managing multiple teachers:

If the student has many teachers, as most middle school and high school students do, it is best to designate one person to talk in depth with the student or have a designated spokesperson coordinate communication. Having long conversations with multiple teachers, coaches, counselors, and so on may be too much for a grieving student.

Sources: Talking with Children | The Coalition to Support Grieving Students & What Not to Say | The Coalition to Support Grieving Students

Provide Academic Accommodations

Juggling classwork, homework, extracurricular activities, and possibly a part-time job can be stressful for students at the best of times. Students who are experiencing grief have the nearly impossible challenge of getting caught up on missed work at a time when they are most likely not getting enough sleep or experiencing optimum mental functioning. They may also have additional responsibilities at home because of their loss (taking care of siblings, additional chores, etc.) or other new challenges. Teachers can and should be empathetic and supportive about schoolwork during this challenging time and make appropriate accommodations.
Commonly Seen Impacts of Grief on Learning:

• Temporary academic challenges that may last days, weeks, or even months
• Difficulty concentrating and learning and/or remembering new concepts and facts
• Worsening of pre-existing learning or attention challenges
• Failing to hand in assignments or study for exams
• A general decline in academic performance
• Increased focus on academics (This is a problem when it is due to guilt; a young child may think they were responsible for a death because they did not do well in school. For older students, schoolwork is a better distraction than substance use or risky behaviors.)

Recommended Support:

• Accept late work for full credit.
• Excuse assignments that are not as important to the learning process.
• Do not call on the student in class if they seem unable to engage or participate, but follow up with the student after class.
• Provide modifications and accommodations:
  • Allow a written assignment in place of an oral presentation.
  • Turn an individual assignment into a group activity.
  • Allow testing in a quiet, private place with extended time.
  • Do not weigh certain grades as heavily.
  • Allow students to retake exams or redo assignments.
• Be aware of and sensitive to the fact that some parts of the curriculum might be difficult and triggering for the student.
• Appreciate that the student showed up even if they cannot engage completely.

Key Point: Do not wait for academic failure. Instead, be proactive and compassionate in your support. Students should be offered tutoring and mentoring to help them catch up and succeed—not only because learning is important but also because school failure would be an additional source of distress.

Sources: Coalition to Support Grieving Students & schoolcrisiscenter.org
Collaborate with Families and Consider Cultural Differences

When you have a grieving student in your class or program, reaching out to the family to express your sympathy and concern is critical. As always, it is important to be culturally sensitive and aware when you engage with families. Expressions of grief and mourning practices vary among religions and cultures, and even within a single religion there are varying beliefs and practices. Families may have multiple religious and cultural affiliations, and the degree of belief or practice in an individual family may differ. You should never make assumptions about beliefs or practices based on culture or religion, but you should be aware that differences exist and be comfortable asking students and families about their personal practices and preferences.

**Culturally Sensitive Questions:**

“How can I best support you and your family at this time?”

“How are you and your family doing?”

“So I can best support you/your child, could you help me understand…”

• What rituals are most important to you and your family right now?
• How does your family mourn the loss of a loved one?
• How does your family and your culture or religion usually recognize and cope with the death of a family member?

Source: Coalition to Support Grieving Students

The Coalition to Support Grieving Students offers many resources about supporting bereaved students and reaching out to families, including:

Connecting with Families
Cultural Sensitivity

**Key Point:** Even if you know something about how members of certain cultural or religious groups typically grieve and mourn, you may not know how an individual member will grieve and mourn. Asking respectful questions about personal and family preferences is the best approach.

Source: Coalition to Support Grieving Students
WHY CULTURALLY SENSITIVE BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT IS IMPORTANT

Here are some helpful concepts to keep in mind when supporting grieving students from cultures other than your own:

- Culture can refer to an ethnicity or a religion or simply an individual family’s preferences, values, and beliefs.
- Different cultures follow a range of traditions, rituals, and practices that are informed by diverse cultural beliefs, norms, and expectations, all of which may help guide individual’s grief and mourning.
- How to talk about a personal loss can vary among cultures:
  - Example: One culture may encourage family members not to say the name of the deceased. Another culture may encourage family members to name the family’s next born child after the deceased.
  - Example: One culture may believe that crying and other public expressions of grief create another hardship for the deceased, so quiet and reserved funerals are the norm. Another culture may think the amount of love for the deceased is reflected by the intensity of the emotions expressed at the funeral, so more overt displays of emotion are common and expected.
- Although there are real cultural differences that play a role in grief and mourning, the fundamental experience of grief is universal.

Key Point: Approach families with an open mind and open heart and be observant and available. While there are significant cultural differences in practices, traditions, and rituals around the death of a loved one, concern for the unique needs of the student and their family is the most important consideration.

Source: Coalition to Support Grieving Students
Bibliotherapy, or reading therapy, is the use of books to help a person cope with life challenges, such as bereavement and grief. Grief is the response to loss, particularly to the loss of someone or something that has died. Books can serve as tools that help children process their grief. Reading about literary characters who have experienced a similar loss can help students feel less alone. Depending on the content, books can also help students understand complex feelings, explain the facts and permanence of death, or even help students connect with memories of their deceased loved one. Learn more about using literature to help grieving students in First Book’s Using Books to Support Students Through Grief, Loss & Healing, a guide for educators sponsored by the New York Life Foundation.

In the Grief, Loss & Healing section on the First Book Marketplace, you will find books that support resiliency, offer comfort and validation, introduce coping techniques, and help guide conversations about grief and loss. This curated selection of books is designed to help educators feel prepared to support the lives of the kids and families they serve, even in the toughest of times. This section offers a broad selection of books that explore the themes of grief, death, and loss, including many that are not intended for bibliotherapy.

Free reading passages and ideas for teaching about death are available at CommonLit.
When to Refer a Student to a Professional and Advice from the First Book Network

When to Refer

Educators should seek immediate evaluation/intervention when they believe a grieving student is at risk for personal harm (e.g., suicidal ideation). In most situations, it is best to support the student as they find their personal path toward coping and healing. For most people, children and adults, the intensity of grief will gradually decrease over the first six months to a year after a loss.* If any of the common symptoms of grief are not improving at that point, or if there are concerns about healthy functioning or development, it may be time to recommend more intensive support.

If you notice any of the following, professional support may be needed:

• Severe depression (e.g., hopelessness, lack of interest in normal activities)
• Self-harm or suicidal thoughts or actions
• Not engaging in self-care activities (e.g., eating, sleeping, bathing) that are required for good health
• Reckless or illegal behavior, dangerous aggression, fighting, or bullying
• Extreme feelings of guilt or desire to seek revenge for the death
• Academic apathy or inability to function at school
• Severe withdrawal or giving up on relationships
• Serious fears and anxiety that get in the way of healthy functioning

* This does not mean that educators need to wait six months to a year before making recommendations to caregivers, such as bereavement support groups or camps or talking with the child’s pediatrician.
• Substance or alcohol abuse
• Prolonged post-traumatic stress symptoms related to the loss:
  • Being jumpy, irritable, or on edge
  • Intrusive thoughts, images, or nightmares about the death
  • Avoiding reminders of the death (e.g., numbing, withdrawal)
  • Difficulty engaging in a healthy grieving process (e.g., sharing memories, maintaining a positive emotional connection, meaning making*) because reminders of the death or the person who died trigger trauma reactions. This is sometimes referred to as traumatic grief.

*Meaning making is the process of understanding and making sense of relationships and life events. In bereavement, it refers to how people assign meaning to the experience of death or loss.

Source: Judi’s House

Bereavement centers are one option for students experiencing grief. A bereavement center is a place where children who have experienced a loss can express their feelings in a safe and supportive environment. There is often the option to be with others who have experienced similar losses. If you think your student might benefit from this type of group support, consider sharing information about local bereavement centers with their parents or caregivers.

Advice from the First Book Network

The following advice was provided by caring school counselors, psychologists, and social workers across the First Book Network of practitioners serving kids in need.

"MANY TIMES, WE WANT TO PROVIDE STUDENTS WITH WHAT WE THINK THEY NEED. REMEMBER THAT SOMETIMES AFTER A LOSS, THE SCHOOL IS THE ONLY THING THAT HAS NOT CHANGED IN HIS OR HER LIFE. THE STUDENT MAY BE REMINDED AT ALL TIMES BY CRYING FAMILY MEMBERS OR AN ABSENT PERSON AT HOME, BUT SCHOOL IS A SENSE OF NORMALCY. AS EDUCATORS, WE NEED TO BE CAREFUL NOT TO TAKE THAT AWAY FROM OUR STUDENTS.

First Book Educator"
School counselors, psychologists, and social workers in the First Book Network shared their advice about supporting grieving students:

“Some students will want to talk about their grief while others may want to have school as a safe zone in which they don’t have to talk about it.”
—Aprile, School Social Worker in Normal, Illinois

“Allow the other students to write a card or kind notes to the student who is grieving.”*
—Yasirah, School Counselor in Lawrenceville, Georgia

“Understand the value of self-care. Watching students we care about hurt can be difficult emotionally. Recognizing how your student’s grief is impacting you and taking steps to address these feelings and work through them can be healing and put educators in a better position to help others.”
—First Book Educator

* Review the cards and notes before sharing to remove anything that may not be appropriate, and allow the parents to review them as well.

Top Priorities When Meeting with a Child After a Loss:

“To ensure they are functioning. They are still getting their basic needs met. They are eating, sleeping, and mental functioning.”
—First Book Educator

“My top priority is to let the student talk through their feeling and if they can’t we go down memory lane and talk about the good memories they had with the person.”
—Rashunda, School Counselor in Dallas, Texas
What Educators Should Know About Grief:

“Forcing children to talk about their grief can actually do more harm than good. Instead providing a listening ear, validating emotions, and introducing healthy coping skills can help students feel safe and supported.”
—First Book Educator

“Grief will show up in a lot of different ways, and it will be a rollercoaster. Birthdays, anniversaries, or sometimes just random days can make their days hard. It’s okay to not know the ‘right’ thing to say or do, the most important thing is to be there for the students. If you need support in working with a student, the school counselor is a resource for you too.”
—Rachel, School Counselor in Pleasant Hill, Missouri

“That grief may look like many inappropriate school behaviors.”
—Katrania, School Counselor in Georgetown, Delaware

How to Work with Mental Health Providers & Families to Support Students Through the Grieving Process:

“The child knowing they have a ‘team’ behind them is a really powerful feeling!”
—School Counselor, Georgia

“Communication is key. Reaching out to family is so important in times when the family may be dealing with loss.”
—Yasirah, School Counselor in Lawrenceville, Georgia

“Keep in mind that a student could need a referral for additional services or supports. Explain what you are seeing and allow time for that student to work with someone that can help and support them.”
—First Book Educator

What to Avoid Doing or Saying When Supporting a Student Experiencing Grief and Loss:

“Don’t assume the student is sad or feeling a certain way.”
—First Book Educator

“Use of words/phrases should be considered. For example, don’t say things like ‘the person is in a better place’ or ‘at least they lived a long life’ or ‘don’t worry, you won’t feel like this for long.’”
—Laurie, School Counselor in Little River, South Carolina

“Don’t dismiss the child’s feelings. Even the death of a pet can be significant for a child.”
—Patricia, School Social Worker in Brownston, Michigan
Collective grief happens when many members of a country, community, or other group experience extreme disruption or loss. Collective grief can be caused by war, natural disasters, or other types of overwhelming suffering and loss. It is important to be aware that some of your students may experience collective grief because of their ethnicity, culture, gender identity, or other group affiliation.

In recent years, Americans have been overwhelmed by multiple types of collective grief. The COVID-19 pandemic is a source of death-related grief as well as the grief caused by job loss; missed milestones like graduations, weddings, and funerals; and prolonged isolation and anxiety. Police violence, community violence, and race- or gender-based hate crimes are also a source of collective grief for many communities.

Public deaths and acts of violence, such as those caused by hate crimes, may cause students to grieve for a person they did not know personally. Mental health experts consider the collective grief experienced by the Black community to be a serious public health crisis. Other groups of Americans are experiencing similar trauma, such as Asian Americans, who have experienced an increased number of hate crimes during the pandemic.

Source: Penn Today | University of Pennsylvania (2020)

WE’RE CONSTANTLY TURNING ON THE TV, FACEBOOK, TWITTER, INSTAGRAM AND SEEING PEOPLE THAT LOOK LIKE US WHO ARE GETTING MURDERED WITH NO REPERCUSSIONS. IT’S NOT NORMAL TO SEE SOMEONE GET MURDERED BY THE CLICK OF A VIDEO ON YOUR PHONE, YET IT HAS BECOME THE NORM FOR OUR PEOPLE, OUR BLACK AND BROWN COMMUNITIES.

Caril Pittman, Co-Founder of GoodKidsMadCity, a Chicago-based youth organization

Source: Associated Press
HELPING EDUCATORS RESPOND TO COLLECTIVE GRIEF

When traumatic events happen, students often arrive at schools and programs needing to understand and process those events in a safe space. Here is one approach to supporting students in your class or program who may be experiencing grief and/or trauma as the result of a recent incidence of social violence or injustice.

➊ LISTEN

• Listen and pay attention to what they say and how they act. Your students may also show their feelings in nonverbal ways such as acting out or withdrawing.

➋ PROTECT

• Answer questions simply and honestly, clearing up confusion your students may have about what happened.
• Let them know they are not alone in their reactions to the event.
• Provide opportunities for them to talk, draw, write, and play, but don’t force it.
• Keep your eyes and ears open for bullying behaviors.
• Limit access to media that shows disturbing scenes of the event. Remember, what is not upsetting to you and other adults may upset and confuse your students, and vice versa.

➌ CONNECT

• Check in with students on a regular basis.
• Find resources that can offer support to your students and classroom.
• Keep communication open with others involved in your students’ lives (parents, other teachers, coaches, etc.).

➍ MODEL & TEACH

• It is good to be aware of your thoughts, feelings, and reactions about the event, which can be seen and can affect your students.
• How you cope and behave after an event will influence how your students cope and behave. Your students will be watching you for both verbal and nonverbal cues.
• Acknowledge the difficulty of the situation but demonstrate how people can come together to cope after such an event.

Adapted from: schoolcrisiscenter.org
CALCULATE, LOCATE, AND COMMUNICATE

When collective grief happens as the result of a racially stressful event, consider sharing the following strategy with your students to help them process their response.

If someone is experiencing a racially stressful moment, such as viewing the killing of George Floyd or learning about the killing of Breonna Taylor, they should notice any feelings they have when they view or hear about the events and calculate how intense those feelings are on a scale from one to ten.

Next, they should locate where on their body they sense those feelings. Some students report feeling it in their gut and describe it as a sinking feeling or someone sitting on their chest.

Communicate means identifying any thoughts or images that arise during the process and writing them down or sharing them.

In all three steps, students should consciously breathe and exhale to reduce stress in the body and calm the mind.

Source: Penn Today | University of Pennsylvania (2020)

Note: Learning of or witnessing violence against members of one’s community or identity group can trigger prior traumatic experiences and feelings of fear and loss of safety. Exercises like the one above are not intended to address grief reactions in these cases.

Use these resources to help support students who belong to groups that are targeted by bias and violence:

- Addressing Race and Trauma in the Classroom: A Resource for Educators | The National Child Traumatic Stress Network
- Racism and Violence: How to Help Kids Handle the News | Child Mind Institute
- What is Collective Grief? | Grief Recovery Center (Houston, TX)
- Steps for Collective Well-Being in the New School Year | Edutopia
- Racial Trauma | Mental Health America
- Racial Trauma, Resiliency and Ally Resources | Counseling Services
Appendix

What Is Grief?
Definitions
Grief Reactions by Age and Development
Additional Resources
What Is Grief?

Grief is a natural reaction to loss. Grief is a strong and often overwhelming emotion that can last for months or years and affect functioning and behavior. It is important for those grieving the loss of a loved one to know the four basic concepts of death, that there is no one timeline for grief, and that everyone experiences grief in their own way. Although grief is not a process that can be rushed or bypassed—and those who care about a grieving person cannot make the pain go away—it can be helpful to find support in community and learn coping techniques that can make the loss more manageable.

THE FOUR BASIC CONCEPTS OF DEATH

Everyone, including children, must understand four basic concepts about death to grieve fully and come to terms with their loss. Teens, and even adults, may understand these concepts in theory but struggle to accept them when facing the loss of a loved one. It is even harder for young children, who do not have the cognitive capacity to understand these concepts, to cope with a loss.

1. Death is irreversible.
2. All life functions end completely at the time of death.
3. Everything that is alive eventually dies.
4. There are physical reasons someone dies.

Source: schoolcrisiscenter.org
Definitions

Grief: A state of deep sorrow caused by a loved one’s death

Bereavement: A period of grief and profound sadness after the death of a family member

Mourning: The expression of deep sorrow for someone who has died, typically involving culturally or religiously specific rituals and customs

Primary Loss: The death of a close family member, friend, or loved one

Secondary Loss: Changes in relationships, schools, family finances, and daily routines caused by a primary loss

Cumulative Grief: The condition of experiencing multiple losses all at once or before healing from and processing an earlier loss

Complicated Grief: A prolonged and heightened state of mourning in which the grieving person is unable to progress through the healing process

Traumatic Grief: When normal grief responses are made worse by the addition of traumatic distress caused by losing a loved one in an unexpected or frightening way; traumatic grief is often caused by a death that is violent, sudden, and frightening.

Collective Grief: When many members of a country, community, or group of people experience extreme change, tragedy, or loss

Culture: The shared customs and beliefs among a people of the same nation or community, such as celebrations, rituals, language, religion, cuisine, music, the arts, and social activities and habits
Grief Reactions by Age and Development

Children usually develop an understanding of death between the ages of five and seven. Young children who experience a death may not fully understand, or have the capacity to understand, what has happened. They may think the deceased is living somewhere else or that they somehow caused the death. Older children will generally have a better understanding of the facts, but they may still be confused and react differently than adults.

Children, like adults, may struggle to understand and process death and loss. If they do not understand that death is an inevitable part of life or the four basic concepts, their grief may become prolonged and complicated. In some cases, confusion about why someone died may lead to guilt and shame. For these reasons, talking about loss is especially important for children—it is not just the essential act of grieving but an important life lesson as well.

Source: schoolcrisiscenter.org
### The Grieving Preschool Child

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Common Behaviors</th>
<th>How to Help</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Changes in eating and sleeping patterns</td>
<td>Use simple, honest answers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thumb sucking</td>
<td>Be prepared to answer the same questions over and over</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General irritability</td>
<td>Support children in imaginative play as an expression of grief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerns about safety and abandonment</td>
<td>Allow for anger and physical expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General confusion</td>
<td>Allow the child to act younger for a while</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Encourage and allow for fun and happy times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have books and posters on death and grief available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Address grief issues in a group setting without focusing on the grieving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>child (e.g., reading a story about grief or death)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### The Grieving Elementary School Student

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Behaviors</th>
<th>How to Help</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regression to earlier behaviors</td>
<td>Answer questions as clearly and accurately as possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting, anger</td>
<td>Provide art, journal, music, and movement activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty paying attention and concentrating</td>
<td>Make time for physical outlets: sports, games, walks, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daydreaming</td>
<td>Help the student identify and use support systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not completing homework or assignments</td>
<td>Work with the student around academic assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleepiness</td>
<td>Encourage the student to take a break and have some alone time if that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdrawal</td>
<td>seems to be what they want or need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Allow for the expression of feelings and emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maintain routines and structure but allow for flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Give the student choices whenever possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Let the student know you care and are thinking about them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assign the student a buddy who can work with them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Create a “safe space” where the student can go when needed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## THE GRIEVING MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Behaviors</th>
<th>How to Help</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arguing</td>
<td>Expect and accept more frequent variations in mood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdrawal, sulleness</td>
<td>Provide a supportive environment where the student can share</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger, fighting</td>
<td>Anticipate increased physical issues, including illness and headaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleepiness</td>
<td>Allow the student choices, including with whom and how they get support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of concentration and attentiveness</td>
<td>Encourage participation in a support group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk-taking behaviors</td>
<td>Allow flexibility in completing schoolwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moodiness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erratic, inconsistent reactions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporting physical issues and illnesses (but with no measurable health problem)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## THE GRIEVING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Behaviors</th>
<th>How to Help</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Withdrawal from parents and other adults</td>
<td>Encourage the expression of feelings such as sorrow, anger, guilt, and regret</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angry outbursts</td>
<td>Answer questions honestly and provide facts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased risk-taking behaviors</td>
<td>Avoid power struggles and allow choices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pushing boundaries and ignoring rules</td>
<td>Help students understand and resolve feelings of helplessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of concentration; inability to focus</td>
<td>Assist students with plans for completing assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong emotions and crying</td>
<td>Allow for some flexibility in assignments, e.g., be willing to adapt assignments to topics relevant to the student’s current experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleepiness, exhaustion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Judi’s House
Additional Resources

New York Life Foundation

New York Life is committed to helping children who have experienced the death of a parent, sibling, or other important person. As part of New York Life’s commitment to this important public priority, they launched a dedicated online grief resource, achildingrief.com, that supports the families, other supportive adult figures, and teachers of bereaved students and includes a comprehensive, state-by-state list of local bereavement support services, articles, and resource materials. Learn how educators can apply to receive a Community Care Credit from New York Life Foundation for a grant on the First Book Marketplace here.

New York Life’s Grief-Sensitive Schools Initiative

A Grief-Sensitive School is an accredited K-12 public or private institution that commits to help provide a supportive environment for students who have experienced the death of a loved one. Participating in the Grief-Sensitive Schools Initiative helps your school personnel address training gaps and signals to students, parents, and community members alike that your school is strongly committed to supporting its grieving students and their families. If you are interested in receiving an in-person Grief-Sensitive Schools presentation and grant from New York Life, visit their website and click on “Becoming a Grief-Sensitive School.”

Using Books to Support Students Through Grief, Loss and Healing | First Book & New York Life Foundation

This discussion guide offers guidance on how to use books with children experiencing grief and loss. It provides suggestions of what to look for when choosing books to use with children in elementary, middle, and high school, and potential reflection questions that may be useful.

Coalition to Support Grieving Students

The Coalition to Support Grieving Students brings together the leading professional organizations representing classroom educators, principals, superintendents, other school administrators, and student support personnel (school counselors, school nurses, school psychologists, and school social workers) with one goal: to support students who have lost parents, siblings, caregivers, or other relatives or close friends. Its website contains resources that empower every adult in every school in the country to comfort a grieving student.

Grief and Loss Resources for Educators | National Education Association

In collaboration with the Coalition to Support Grieving Students, the NEA offers a set of industry-endorsed resources to empower school communities in their ongoing support of grieving students. This site offers a list of grief and loss resources for self-care, wellness, and resiliency.
National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement is dedicated to helping schools support their students through crisis and loss. The Center provides free immediate technical assistance and advice to schools and communities in the aftermath of major crisis events and throughout long-term recovery. The Center advocates for policies that encourage best practices in crisis and grief support in schools and conducts research in the fields of childhood bereavement and school crisis. The Center coordinates the Coalition to Support Grieving Students.

The National Alliance for Children’s Grief

The National Alliance for Children’s Grief provides a network for nationwide communication among hundreds of children’s bereavement centers that want to share ideas, information, and resources with others to better support the families they serve in their own communities.

The Steve Fund

The Steve Fund is the nation’s leading organization focused on supporting the mental health and emotional well-being of young people of color. The Steve Fund has created a special keyword, STEVE, that young people of color can text to 741741 to connect with a trained crisis counselor 24/7.

Download the flyer:
Download in PDF format (letter-sized, for printing and posting on walls, bulletin boards)
Download in JPG format (for using in Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.)

Judi’s House - For Grieving Children and Families

Judi’s House/JAG Institute supports children grieving a death by supporting them in building connection and coping. All services and programs are provided at no cost. Schools and organizations may reach out to Judi’s House at any time with grief related questions or concerns. These consultations are available to increase support for grieving children and to build an understanding of the impact of grief. For consultations, email schoolgroups@judishouse.org.

Supporting the Grieving Student | American Federation of Teachers

The AFT and the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement have partnered to help educators and other school personnel better understand their role with grieving students. The resources on this site are designed to help you better serve bereaved students within the school setting and to provide a basic level of training so educators can start critical conversations and offer support.

Addressing Grief: Tips for Teachers and Administrators | National Association of School Psychologists

School-based support and increased understanding are essential when a student experiences the death of a friend or loved one. This resource offers strategies that can be helpful in supporting bereaved students.
A Handbook for Teachers and Administrators | Stanford Children’s Hospital

Created by the Family Guidance and Bereavement Program at the Lucile Packard Children’s Hospital Stanford, this handbook for teachers was written based on the hospital’s work with grieving children and their firsthand stories about navigating educational and social complexities at school.

The Dougy Center for Grieving Children & Families

The Dougy Center offers support, resources, and connection before and after a death. Their website offers tip sheets, activities, podcasts, and more through personalized toolkits designed for children, teens, young adults, parents/caregivers, and schools.

Eluna Network | Eluna Resource Center

Eluna’s innovative resources and programs address the critical needs of children experiencing powerful, overwhelming, and often confusing emotions associated with the death of someone close to them. In 2002, Eluna created Camp Erin which has grown into the largest free bereavement program for children and teens in the U.S. and Canada, with locations serving children in every Major League Baseball city.

Books about Grief, Loss, & Healing | First Book Marketplace

The First Book Marketplace offers well-crafted books that help students build resiliency, offer comfort and validation, introduce coping techniques, and help guide conversations about grief and loss. This curated selection of books is designed to help educators feel prepared to support the lives of the kids and families they serve, even in the toughest of times.

Helping Kids Grieve | Sesame Street in Communities

This site offers books, videos, printable resources, articles, interactive activities, and workshops that are searchable by length and age.
Sources


