

Conversation and Support: Talking with Grieving Children

By The Coalition to Support Grieving Students / February, 2015

“A lot of people stayed away from me and didn’t really talk to me a lot.”

Quentin

Imagine a child or youth you might come across in your work as a school professional. Imagine this child has experienced something deeply troubling and painful. Many people—both adults and peers—know about this event. But few, or perhaps none, actually speak up to offer the child support, caring and understanding.

Even if we don’t know the specifics, we can envision some of the consequences. The child is likely to feel isolated, disturbed by feelings of guilt or shame, and have trouble concentrating on school work. There’s a good chance this troubling event is going to contribute to difficulties socially, emotionally and academically over time.

This, unfortunately, is the actual scenario for many children who experience the death of someone close—a parent, other family member, friend. Peers, teachers and other adults feel an awkwardness about the subject of death. They worry that mentioning it will only cause more distress. They don’t know what to do about the child’s suffering. They don’t know what to say.

Grief in Children is Common

Our awkwardness discussing death and grief poses a serious problem. The experience of grief is not unusual for children. By the time they finish high school, nearly all will have experienced the death of someone close—a family member, a good friend, a teacher, a favorite neighbor. About 5% will experience the death of a parent while they are in school.

What can school professionals do to support grieving children? Some surprisingly simple steps can make a world of difference to students and their families.

One of the simplest and most important is to express concern directly to the student. You might say, “I was so sorry to hear about the death of your grandfather. How are you doing? How is your family?”

Invite the Conversation

Everyone responds to grief differently, but virtually all students will appreciate such simple gestures. In fact, many would like to talk further about their experiences—and their thoughts, feelings and fears.

Teachers and other school staff are excellent choices to provide this support. In most cases, they are more removed from the person who died. Children don't need to shield school staff the same way they might want to protect their parents, who often are also grieving. They can ask a teacher or school counselor questions and say things that they might hold back from their families.

Open-ended questions and a willingness to “listen more and talk less” let children know you're available for the conversation. Even if a child seems uninterested in talking at first, it's helpful to maintain this kind of contact over time. Their questions often evolve. It may take some time for them to figure out how to put what they're feeling into words.

These simple but powerful steps can make an immense difference in a child's adjustment to the death of someone close. Making this connection supports the child's emotional and social development and can help strengthen academic functioning during a challenging period.

Find Out More

School staff and others who work with children and youth can learn more at the newly launched website of the [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](http://grievingstudents.scholastic.com/) [http://grievingstudents.scholastic.com/]. The website offers a range of modules that address issues related to children and grief. The skills and guidelines in these modules can help school staff support grieving children.

The first module, *Talking With Children*, offers practical suggestions for how school professionals can initiate a conversation with students who have recently experienced the death of a close family member or friend. It discusses why it is important for teachers to reach out to students after a loss and initiate a conversation. Interviews with children, parents and staff share real-world examples of teachers and others school staff who have helped grieving children and their families. Viewers can download, review and print module summaries.

A specially-developed set of video simulations demonstrate how to talk with grieving and children. The videos provide a realistic sense of what these conversations might be like. There are moments of awkwardness, silences, children

who are obviously experiencing painful thoughts, and teachers who succeed in reaching out, starting a conversation and providing much-needed support.

Make the Difference

The [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](http://grievingstudents.scholastic.com/) [http://grievingstudents.scholastic.com/] provides tools that can help school staff fulfill one of the most important functions of their careers—make a genuine difference in students’ lives and their abilities to grow well and learn well.

The Coalition to Support Grieving Students was convened by the New York Life Foundation, a pioneering advocate for the cause of childhood bereavement, and the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, which is led by pediatrician and childhood bereavement expert David J. Schonfeld, M.D. The Coalition has worked with Scholastic Inc., a long-standing supporter of teachers and kids, to create grievingstudents.org, a groundbreaking, practitioner-oriented website designed to provide educators with the information, insights, and practical advice they need to better understand and meet the needs of the millions of grieving kids in America’s classrooms.