

Back to School: Remember That Transitions Can Be Tough for Grieving Students

Summer break is ending. Students are returning to school with a range of feelings and reactions. Some are delighted to be back in the social world of friends. Others are apprehensive about their upcoming classes. Some are excited to mark one more step forward as they grow and mature, especially if they're moving up to middle or high school.

In all of the bustle of the year's start, one group that can easily be overlooked is students who are grieving the loss of a parent, sibling or other close family member or friend. Most education professionals would expect children with a recent loss to face some challenges in their academic focus. However, the ongoing experience of grief is often less recognized.

Here are three key features to remember about grief over time for children and teens.

1. *Grief proceeds on its own terms.* Grief does not end at a fixed point. In many ways, children never get over a significant loss. It is a life-changing event.
2. *As children grow and develop, normal transitions and changes in their lives will remind them of their loss.* A boy in elementary school whose father died may miss him acutely years later as he enters puberty. A girl navigating the new social intricacies of high school may wish more than ever for the guidance and advice of her mother who died several years prior. As grieving children see peers enjoying support from families, they may feel their loss deeply, even years after the death occurred.
3. *As children develop, they become more capable of understanding and adjusting to their loss.* As time passes, the work of grieving becomes less difficult and requires less energy. It begins as a full-time job, but becomes more of a part-

time effort that allows other meaningful experiences to occur. Grieving lasts a lifetime, but it does not need to consume a life.

An Ideal Time to Make a Difference

The beginning of the school year is an ideal juncture for education professionals to remind themselves of steps that can help recognize and support grieving students over time.

1. *Teach about death and grief.* Use developmentally appropriate lessons about death and grief to normalize the experience of grief for all students. Talk about losses that have impacted the community. Such lessons and discussions also help peers understand how to offer appropriate support to grieving students.
2. *Offer options for family activities.* Many students do not have a parent to turn to for family-based homework activities. This can be due to death, divorce, military deployment, a parent in prison, mental illness in a parent or other reasons. Always offer options—“Talk to your parent or another adult you know and trust. If you’d like any help identifying someone to talk to for this assignment, please see me.”
3. *Recognize that grieving children are often more vulnerable at times of transition.* This can be the start of the school year (new teachers, new classmates, new classroom). It can involve a change in schools or a change in the family—someone moving in or out. It can include the changes of puberty, the start of dating or a breakup with a romantic partner.

If you’ve been working with a grieving student who is transitioning to a new school, ask the student and parents if they would like you to notify the new school of the circumstances. Often, this creates a safer and more welcoming setting for the student. Families may appreciate being relieved of the need to contact the new school about the student’s situation.

If you learn that one of your new students has experienced a death, reach out early in the year. Acknowledge that this can sometimes create challenges for

students and let the student know you're available to talk, or listen, if any concerns arise.

4. *Support high school juniors and seniors in their college and career aspirations.*

After a death, teens may hesitate to move forward with plans to go to college, join the military or attend a trade school. They may feel the family needs them nearby. Sometimes they are expected to contribute financially to the family. While there is no single "correct" solution in these situations, the support of a trusted teacher or other school professional who can listen to a student's concerns can be invaluable.

When educators make the effort to be available to grieving students in these ways, they have the opportunity to experience some of the most rewarding moments within their profession.

Learn more about children's experiences during grief and ways to offer support at the [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

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.