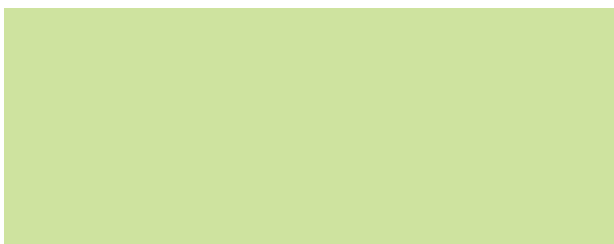
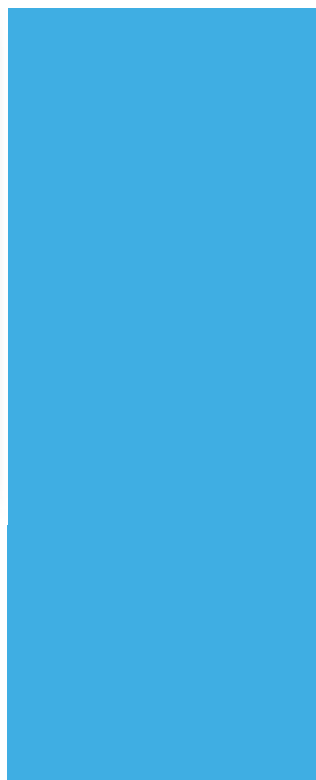
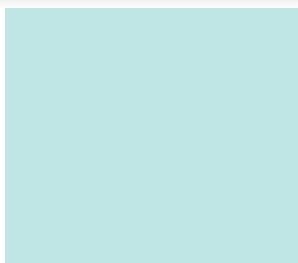


Supporting the Grieving Elementary-Aged Child

Information for Professionals



Grief is a natural response to love and loss. Children who have experienced a death can be a particular challenge for those who work with them in professional settings. What do we say? How can we help?

Sometimes choices are made to act as if nothing significant occurred and return the child to typical routines or expectations. Unfortunately when this occurs, a child might conclude that the death did not matter, that his/her feelings are not important, or that no one cares about him/her. The effects of these erroneous conclusions can be long-lasting and far-reaching. The purpose of this brochure is to provide those who work with elementary-aged children with knowledge of how to provide support to children who are grieving.



Children who are grieving experience a variety of feelings, sometimes in succession, sometimes at the same time. You can help children identify and express these feelings, which can include:

Helplessness

Sadness

Hopelessness

Guilt

Fear

Confusion

Emptiness

Restlessness

Despair

Irritability

Low motivation

Low energy

Loneliness

Anger

Shock

Inability to concentrate/focus

Increased/decreased appetite &/or sleep

There is no time frame for grieving! Grief can come in spurts, feelings can come and go, but each person's grief journey is unique and impacted by other losses and grief experiences that one may have had. A child can have "good days" followed by more difficult days. This is typical and can be confusing for the child who is going through it, as well as for those who are offering support. Children cannot tolerate feelings of grief and sadness for long periods. It is normal to see a grieving child take "time out" for play.

What can you do to help?

Visit the child.

A visit at home, before he/she returns to school, or during visitation that is part of funeral arrangements communicates to the child that he/she is cared about and supported.

Create a safe place.

Children need a safe place to ask questions and explore their own answers. Your presence and willingness to listen is more important than specific answers to questions. They need opportunities to experience their feelings and to express them without having others try to “fix” them.

Provide opportunities to express thoughts and feelings.

Some children will want to talk about their thoughts, feelings and experiences, while others will want to express them through art, music, movement, or other activities. Having play techniques available will enable you to have tools that are comfortable and familiar to the child to use as needed. Having books available for sharing with children can facilitate healing and understanding and can assist in sharing a sensitive topic or painful situation.

Maintain consistent roles and boundaries.

While you may be tempted to be more nurturing or more of a listening ear to a child who is grieving, blurring boundaries or acting outside of your role could be confusing to the child. Once the nurturing or additional attention ends, the child could experience a secondary loss. If the child needs additional support, draw on resources already in place, such as the school counselor, who can provide that support within that role.

Be honest with your words.

Clichés such as, “I’m sorry you lost your mother,” “Grandma’s watching you from heaven,” and “You’re the man of the house now,” can be misinterpreted (Mother will be found. Be fearful of being watched.) or pressure children to shut off emotions and assume adult responsibilities. They will be less confused and more open to talking about their experiences if accurate words are used. If you are aware that a child is not fully informed about the circumstances related to the death, convey that you understand the child feels confused or curious and contact the family to let the child’s caregivers know that he/she has some questions.

Offer support.

Listen to the child in a supportive, nonjudgmental way. Be present for him/her.

Be respectful of family beliefs and values.

Death and dying experiences bring to the forefront values and beliefs that may conflict with your own. When a child asks questions, you can be most helpful by asking the child about what he/she believes, what family members are saying, or referring the child back to the family for further discussion. Introducing conflicting values and beliefs can add to confusion and distress as well as complicate the child's grieving process.

Prepare classmates for the child’s return.

Inform them about how their classmate who is grieving may be feeling and what help he/she might need for a few weeks after returning to school, such as the ability to excuse himself/herself from the classroom, alternate assignments, and help with taking notes or understanding assignments. Check with the child and his/her caregiver to see whether he/she wants to be a part of the conversation with classmates.

Stay in contact with the family.

Remember that you are working with a child who lives in a family system. Staying in contact with the family about questions, concerns, and observations will help both you and the family remain aware of what might be going on with the child.

Consider holidays or special events.

Sometimes special activities such as making Mother's Day cards, Grandparent's Day, or holiday events can be difficult reminders for children of the death of a significant person. Anticipating that a child might need an alternate activity or other options in order to participate in the event can help reassure the child that his/her concerns are considered and gives choices about how he/she wants to handle such activities.



Common Questions & Supportive Responses:

Children who are grieving need to know that they have adults to go to with their questions, worries or concerns, and they need to know that it is okay for them to ask questions. More than specific answers to their questions, they need someone to listen to them and to provide support. Examples of supportive comments include:

“What you are feeling or thinking is typical. I’ve felt that way, too.”

“Tell me more about your thoughts or feelings.”

“Tell me about ____ (person who died), and what he/she meant to you.”

Responding to Questions:

Examples of common questions the grieving child may ask and the possible thinking behind them include:

“Who else will die?”

A child may be concerned about his/her own safety & security, or may cling to the surviving parent, fearful of his/her death.

“Who will take care of me?”

This is especially relevant if one parent has already died. A supportive response to this question is, “You are wondering what will happen to you.”

“Why?”

To validate the child’s pain, a supportive response is, “That’s a good question. I have wondered that too.”

“Is it my fault?”

While we are tempted to respond with, “No,” this type of response shuts down the conversation related to what the child is thinking or feeling. Instead, respond with, “It feels like it was your fault,” or “You are wondering if you could have done something differently.”

“Is it my responsibility to take care of the family now?”

Although children may have to help out more, they are still children. Talking about increases in responsibilities or expectations can be helpful as these changes are significant to the child and associated with the death of an important person in his/her life.

Signs that additional assistance/referral is needed

A child who:

- is depressed or withdrawn;
- begins or resumes cutting;
- shows aggression or has frequent emotional outbursts;
- makes verbal or written statements that suggest the child is at risk to harm self or others;
- has auditory or visual hallucinations;
- is using drugs or alcohol;
- shows dark content in assignments or creative projects;
- has experienced multiple losses in a relatively short period of time;
- has an adult caregiver who is overwhelmed by grief and who may be unable to attend to the child's grief journey as well.



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