

Maryland School Mental Health Alliance*

Grief and Bereavement in Children Information for School Clinicians

Definition

Grief is the normal process of responding to loss, including death. Grief puts a great stress on the physical body as well as on the psyche, resulting in wear and tear beyond what is normal. Further, grief is often accompanied by crying, lack of sleep, loss of appetite, and ceasing to care for one's physical and emotional wellbeing. All of these symptoms can contribute to a predisposition for illness in grieving clients. Children may exhibit signs of delinquency, rage, introversion or other problems.

Bereavement is the period after a loss during which grief is experienced. The time of bereavement depends on several factors including a person's attachment to the person or thing that was lost and the amount of time spent anticipating the loss.

Why Do We Care?

- The way that children communicate and manage the death of a loved one will affect how they are able to mourn at the time, recover from this experience, return to their daily routine, and manage loss in the future.
- Many children are affected by intense grief; approximately 1 in 20 American youth will experience loss of a parent before age 18.
- After losing a parent, 85% of children exhibit such symptoms as difficulty sleeping, angry outbursts, worry, depression, bed-wetting, and thumb-sucking. After a year, more regressive behaviors may fade, but other problems, such as lack of confidence and preoccupation with illness, are likely to continue.
- Grieving children are prone to depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts.

What Do We Do About It?

- **Create a support team** that deals with grieving children; meet at least four times a year to review bereavement research and methods of supporting children at various ages.
- **Communicate to all school staff that children's grief is a "natural, normal, and healthy response"** to death, and that grieving children need emotional support at school as well as at home.
- **Consider each grieving child as an individual case**, taking into account the child's age, experiences with death, and home life.
- **Teach staff how to answer grieving children's** questions and how to talk about their thoughts and feelings.
- **Ask teachers to watch for signs** of a serious problem such as grieving students who are disoriented, confused, forgetful, impatient, sad, inattentive, and disruptive, as well as those whose grief resurfaces months after a death.

- **Help students resume their regular schedules and studies;** provide counseling for children who struggle with "the deep and exhausting inner work of grief."

Key Resources/Links

Helping the Bereaved Child at School

www.ctdn.org/downloads/HelpingtheBereavedChildatSchool.pdf

Child Bereavement Trust <http://www.childbereavement.org.uk/>

Tool-kit for helping children cope with grief within the school system

www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/2006/RAND_TR413.pdf

**Developed by the Center for School Mental Health (<http://csmh.umaryland.edu>) in collaboration with the Maryland School Mental Health Alliance.*