

Maryland School Mental Health Alliance*

Grief and Bereavement in Children Information for Teachers and School Staff

Definition

Grief is the normal process when there is a death or a loss, such as a divorce. Grief may produce physical, mental, social, or emotional reactions. Physical reactions can include changes in appetite, physical problems such as headaches or stomachaches, sleeping problems, and illness. Mental reactions can include anger, guilt, sadness, worry, and despair. Social reactions can include withdrawal from normal activities and the need to be near others or to be apart from others. Grief processes also depend on the situation surrounding the death or loss, the relationship with the person who died and the person's attachment to that person.

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?

- There has been a huge increase in school tragedies in the recent years. Children are forced to deal with witnessing the murder of their peers and the fear of it happening to them. As an educator, we are responsible for helping children mourn their losses and feel safe in their school environment.
- The way in which children are communicated with and managed at the time of a loss will affect how they are able to grieve at the time and how they manage loss in the future.
- Grieving youth are prone to depression, and anxiety and many other problems.
- Often, grieving youth have problems in school. Whether it be lower grades or aggressive behavior, children often manifest their pain in the school setting.

What Do We Do About It?

- **Explanation of death** – It is important to keep children informed about the death of a loved one or peer. They should be told the truth as soon as possible in a way that is tailored to their level of understanding. Be sure to address their fears and answer their questions, so they may fully understand what is happening and how they are feeling. Be aware that children may ask the same questions over and over.
- **Do not avoid the topic if the child wants to talk.** Although death can be an uncomfortable topic, children should feel comfortable talking about what they are going through. If an adult is closed to these discussions, it can send the message that grieving is shameful or not valued.
- **Create a safe place** outside the classroom for the child to go if they need to be alone, set this up so no explanation is needed in front of classmates. Ensure that either you or another adult is available to talk at these times.
- **Keep in close contact with parents.** Ensure that you are monitoring and noting any behavior that may seem different, meet with parents regularly. It is important to remember that often teachers spend more time with children than anyone, it is necessary to know your students well in order to watch for any signs of serious problems.

- **Correct language** – Make sure to use developmentally appropriate terms when explaining death to children. It is important to be clear and not dance around the issue with euphemisms.
- **Be patient.** Grieving children often show signs of poor concentration and may act out, it is important to help kids stay on task, often being a part of a routine is comforting. If s/he is being disruptive it may be more beneficial to refer him/her to the guidance counselor or school psychologist rather than simply reprimanding.
- **Planning memorial ceremonies** – Being involved in the planning of a memorial service can help a child receive closure and focus on fond memories of the person. Involvement should be strictly on a volunteer basis and children should not be forced to participate. Children who do not wish to participate in planning should be invited the memorial services provided in or outside of school. (paraphrased from:
<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/supportivecare/bereavement/HealthProfessional/page8>)

Helpful Resources

- *Helping the Grieving Student: A Guide for Teachers* by The Dougy Center for Grieving Children is a great book that provides teachers with practical advice when dealing with grieving students.
- *Death in the Classroom* by Kathleen Zokas deals directly with how teachers should respond when there has been a death in the school setting. Provides step by step information on how to deal with the first 48 hours and memorial services in the school.
- UCLA School Mental Health Project: Grief and Loss Practice Notes:
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/practicenotes/grief.pdf>
- National Association of School Psychologists
www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/griefwar.pdf
- With Eyes Open- Resources for Teachers:
http://www.pbs.org/witheyeyesopen/resources_youth.html
- Family Health International - <http://www.ovcsupport.net/sw2357.asp>
- http://www.childrensgrief.net/Helping_the_grieving_child_in_school.htm is a great resource for teachers, provides general information on what to expect from a grieving child as well as specific information for grieving children with LD or ADD/ADHD.
- <http://www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetails.aspx?p=114&np=141&id=1662> illustrates how children grieve and their level of understanding per age group.
- http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/bruceperry/child_loss.htm gives a great overview of what grieving children go through as well as common asked questions.

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