

How Childcare, Daycare, and Afterschool Providers Can Support Newly Bereaved People



The death of a child is a life-altering event. Individuals who interact with bereaved parents, siblings, caregivers, and other family members in the aftermath of tragedy have a unique opportunity to provide meaningful support during this crucial time. This fact sheet provides tips for childcare, daycare, and afterschool providers when connecting with newly bereaved families.



Childcare, Daycare, and Afterschool Providers Can Make All the Difference

Childcare, daycare, and afterschool providers are trusted caregivers who play a significant role in the lives of children and their families. In addition to managing the emotions and associated behaviors of classmates and other children impacted by a child's death, they must manage their own grief and, often, that of their colleagues. This is a heavy burden for anyone. Grace and patience with the children, your colleagues, and—most of all—yourself will be critical in the days, weeks, and months following the death of a child.

Impact of Grief on Cognition and Understanding

Grief, particularly traumatic grief such as the death of a child, significantly affects brain functioning. Newly bereaved individuals are not just sad; their ability to understand, process, and comprehend information is impaired. Oftentimes, parents or caregivers may present as confused or disorganized by not being able to access information as basic as their child's date of birth or middle name.

Practical Tips

Newly bereaved families may interact with childcare providers who cared for the deceased child and may or may not still provide care for bereaved siblings.

For providers still offering childcare for bereaved families, here are a few tips:

- 1. Say the child's name.** Using the child's name in conversation acknowledges the importance of their life. Don't worry about reminding bereaved families of their child; they are thinking about them constantly.
- 2. Assure families of their child(ren)'s safety.** Whenever calling the family, start every conversation with, "Hi, it's your childcare provider, and your child is safe." Then, transition to the subject of the conversation.
- 3. Use clear, age-appropriate language.** The concept of death evolves for children as they age. It's important to follow expert guidance on how to talk about death. For example, if you say that the deceased child is "sleeping," the bereaved sibling may be afraid to sleep.
- 4. Reassure children that they are not responsible.** Even from a young age, it is common for siblings to feel they did something to cause their sibling's death. Reminding them repeatedly that they aren't to blame can help them understand it's not their fault and keep them from carrying guilt inside.

- 5. Use sensitivity when managing the child's belongings.** One of the most difficult and painful decisions faced by schools and childcare providers is what to do with the child's belongings. Asking families what belongings they would like is a first step.
- 6. Exercise compassion regarding billing.** As an agency, determine whether and how you will bill the family for the care provided to the child prior to their death and communicate that information prior to sending the bill. Experiencing death is expensive, and it can cause financial hardship.

For providers that offered care to the deceased child, here are a few tips:

- 1. Send condolence cards.** Immediately upon the death, the childcare facility should send a condolence card to the family.
- 2. Release from contract.** Releasing the family from childcare contracts and reimbursing them at a prorated amount for unused care days is thoughtful and considerate.
- 3. Important school dates.** As the school year continues, inviting the family to key school events may be appropriate. Give them the choice to attend and ask if acknowledging their child in ceremonies or activities feels right for them. It may be too painful for some, whereas others may welcome the opportunity for their child to be remembered.

Other Things to Keep in Mind

There are a variety of ways to offer compassion, dignity, and respect for bereaved families. Here are a few more tips:

- **How many children do you have?** One of the most difficult questions a newly bereaved parent or caregiver will be asked is, "How many children do you have?" There is no right answer, but be prepared for them to include all their children, whether living or dead.
- **Simple questions can be hurtful.** Common questions like, "How are you doing?" can be reframed as, "How are you coping?" to acknowledge how challenging losing a child is. It may be helpful to ask, "Could I bring you dinner this week?" or simply say, "I have been thinking of you."
- **Don't ask how the child died.** What's important is that the child died, not how they died. Asking how they died may lead families to relive the most painful experience of their life.
- **All deaths are not created equal.** Resist the urge to share your experience with death. If you have experienced the death of a child, you may offer a time to visit with them privately, but be sensitive to the possible impact on the family and on you when sharing your experience.
- **Grief will last a long time.** Bereaved families will not be "feeling better" in a few weeks or even in a year. It takes many years to adjust to such profound loss; their lives are forever changed.
- **It's their story, not yours.** Being a safe place for bereaved families to share their memories, feelings, and hardships will lend support during tender times.

Resources

- **988: Free Mental Health Hotline.** If you or someone you know is in crisis, call or text 988 to be connected to crisis intervention and suicide prevention resources. Learn more at 988lifeline.org/get-help/.
- **Sesame Workshop** offers free grief and bereavement resources for those caring for young children. Learn more at sesameworkshop.org/topics/grief/.
- **Evermore** is dedicated to improving the lives of bereaved people. For more information, visit evermore.org. To access a national free Grief Support Directory, visit evermore.org/grief-support-directory.