

How Teachers, Educators, and Staff Can Support Newly Bereaved People

Schools and Educators Can Make All the Difference

Schools are touchpoints playing 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, you are faced with managing your own grief and that of your 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.

Before the age of 25, an estimated 8 percent of children and young adults will experience the death of a sibling. While brothers tend to have lower test scores following the death of a sibling; sisters tend to have interlinked and longer lasting impacts, including a higher risk of dropping out of high school, not attending college, earning lower wages, enrolling in social welfare programs, and becoming pregnant as a teen. Declines in health and human capital (e.g., market earnings) persist across the lifespan.

Impact of Grief on Cognition and Understanding

Grief, particularly traumatic grief such as the death of a child or sibling, significantly affects brain functioning. Newly bereaved individuals are not just sad; their ability to understand, process, and comprehend information is impaired. Oftentimes, parents, caregivers, or siblings may present as confused or disorganized by not being able to access information, let alone perform well scholastically.

Practical Tips

- 1 Clear school policies.** Adopting clear bereavement policies and practices that set expectations and guidelines for students, faculty, and staff. Prepare and strengthen school policies now.
- 2 Assure parents and caregivers of their child(ren)'s safety.** Whenever calling the family, start every conversation with, "Hi, it's your child's school, and your child is safe." Then, transition to the subject of the conversation.
- 3 Say the child's name.** Using the child's name in conversation acknowledges the importance of their life. Don't worry about reminding bereaved parents and caregivers of their child; they are thinking about them constantly.
- 4 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.
- 5 Know the signs.** Grief often manifests as changes in sleep patterns, changes in appetite, loss of interest in hobbies, loss of motivation or focus, significant and sudden shifts in mood, and social isolation. These behaviors can negatively impact attendance and academic performance and may result in school withdrawal or expulsion. With permission from the student and/or parent/caregiver, inform all instructors and staff to be observant and reach out to administration if they notice the student struggling academically or socially.
- 6 Consider temporary accommodations.** Due to the potential impact of grief on cognition, students may struggle with retaining information and understanding complex concepts. Strategies to accommodate this temporary shift may be very helpful. For example, allowing for extra time for test-taking or allowing for open-book tests and quizzes.
- 7 Acknowledge the loss and listen.** Often siblings, regardless of the circumstances, feel personally responsible for the death. It is important to listen and help redirect students away from feelings of guilt and blame.
- 8 Honor cultural and religious traditions.** Always be responsive to how cultural and religious practices might influence the grieving and mourning process. Refrain from using expressions such as "God only gives you what you can handle" or "Your child is safely in God's arms now."



- 9 Recognize that family dynamics change.** Vast changes in a family's social structure are underway. Siblings may feel that it "should have been them" who died, or they must be perfect for their parents or caregivers. Provide a safe place with trusted adults so they do not suffer in silence.

When a student has died, here are a few tips for schools:

- 1 Use sensitivity when managing the student's belongings.** One of the most difficult and painful experiences for parents and caregivers is retrieving their child's belongings. Asking parents or caregivers how and when they would like to receive those belongings is an important first step.
- 2 Discuss graduation and other important events.** Talk to the family about how to honor or recognize the student during school events, including graduation.
- 3 Consider sending written condolences to the family or caregivers.** Families appreciate support from the institutions that served their children.
- 4 Cease all institutional communication.** Remove the family and caregivers from all correspondence (calls, emails, and flyers) from the county and school unless other children are enrolled.



Importance of Self-Care

Teachers often experience a higher level of stress than many other professionals. Support may be required to cope with the continual exposure to stress, death, and trauma. Simple steps such as taking a walk, getting enough sleep, drinking water, and spending time with the people you care about can be powerful preventative acts, as can reaching out to a professional to support your mental health. Taking care of yourself is fundamental to serving your community.

Other Things to Keep in Mind

There are a variety of ways to offer compassion, dignity, and respect for bereaved parents, caregivers, and 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 of their children, whether living or dead.
- There are no stages of grief.** The stages of grief are a common misconception.
- 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 parents and caregivers to relive the most painful experience of their life.
- Grief will last a long time.** Bereaved parents and caregivers 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 family members 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.
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)** offers information on coping with bereavement and grief, visit samhsa.gov/communities/coping-bereavement-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/.