

A painting of a child standing on a ledge, looking up at a large, colorful, abstract shape in the sky. The child is small and dark, standing on a brown ledge. The sky is a mix of blue, purple, and white. The background is dark and textured, suggesting a cave or a rocky cliffside.

# When Grief Strikes

**C**hildren want and need concrete answers concerning death. One-on-one counseling, group discussions, and the arts help many children work through grief. If one of your students is grieving, it is best to speak with the school counselor about ways to help the student. Why a student is grieving may determine the best way to handle the situation and help the child. Divorce, chronic or terminal illness, suicide, or an accidental death in the family all cause pain and sorrow, but may require different responses from support figures. You will want to be aware of available resources to assist the student and to help you handle the situation in wise ways.

Parents need teachers to assist them during a sad time in their child's life, according to Karron Johnson, who has more than 24 years experience as a kindergarten teacher in Starkville, Mississippi. When a student has experienced a tragedy, "it is

so important to really observe the child, know what the parents are telling the child, discuss the death with the other students before the child returns to school, and to work with the school counselor," she said. Careful observation is important because of varying reactions. "One student did not openly display her grief, but another student sobbed and needed some quiet time with me several times after his dad's traumatic death. I am available for the student and willing to refer students for professional counseling if needed," Johnson said.

Laurie Battaglia, a sixth-grade teacher at Clear Creek Independent School District near Houston, Texas, discussed how her school handled the death of the astronauts in February 2003. "It was extremely difficult to go on as scheduled that Monday, but it was something that had to be done." Battaglia, a master teacher, suggested that classmates have a chance to create something special for the student who has suffered a loss, and that a teacher should discuss with students what should and should not occur once the student returns to the classroom. She mentioned that after-school tutoring helps the student with makeup work and the healing process.

Sometimes grieving is schoolwide, as when a student or teacher passes away. Bob D. Fuller, Principal of Armstrong Middle School in Starkville, knows firsthand how to address such a situation. In 1996, one of the school's soccer players committed suicide. Following the school district's handbook, he formed a crisis team made up of the principal, assistant principal, school counselor, principal's secretary, school nurse, and key teachers. Members initiated specific activities during the first four days after the suicide.

In a suicide situation, the crisis team must see that the death doesn't become romanticized; so even a memorial service isn't initiated. The team invited concerned parents to the school, as well as local counselors, to assist distraught students. "Opening up 'after-school homes' as safe gathering places for grieving students showed the teenagers that adults care and want to help them deal with the death," Fuller said.



On a daily basis, teachers serve as surrogate parents; however, the role takes on new dimensions when helping children to process grief in healthy ways. Though the school counselor should direct the process, simply listening may be a teacher's greatest capacity for helping. When the grandfather of one of Priscilla Battaglia's ninth-grade French students was dying, the boy often talked to her during lunch. He told her about his grandfather's latest medical treatment and lamented how he hated seeing him suffer. During their conversations, she shared about her mother's illness, letting him know that she understood. When his grandfather died, the student called her at home to let her know. Healing can begin with care and concern from a trusted confidant. ■



*Linda C. McGrath is a certified health counselor. Her e-mail is lnc15@msstate.edu.*

*Vincent R. McGrath is a professor in the College of Education at Mississippi State University. The two are co-counselors of the Theta Chi Chapter. Contact him at vmcgrath@colled.msstate.edu.*

## Web Resources on Grief

**[www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)** — National center for grieving children and families, a nonprofit online resource.

**<http://grieflossrecovery.com>** — Offers reflections on grief and loss through poems, articles, a newsletter, memoirs, memorials, links, and online grief support.

**[www.childrengrief.net](http://www.childrengrief.net)** — Linda Goldman's books and seminars give a fresh and hopeful view of today's kids and of how caregivers can work together as a "village grief team" in a new paradigm.

**[www.connectforkids.org](http://www.connectforkids.org)** — Connect for Kids provides solution-oriented coverage of critical issues for children and families.

**[www.petloss.com](http://www.petloss.com)** — Losing a pet can be traumatic. This site offers compassionate articles, poems, message boards, and an online support-group format.

**[www.familygrief.com](http://www.familygrief.com)** — Stories, recommended readings, and grief-related information from T. A. Barron, the author of *Where Is Grandpa?*, a book that introduces grief through the story of a young boy whose beloved grandfather dies.