

Responding to **Grief** in **Students**



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Children and adolescents experience many types of losses in their lives, from the ordinary, such as the death of a pet, to the catastrophic, such as the World Trade Center bombing of 9/11. No loss is unimportant, and teachers and caregivers must be careful not to trivialize a child's grief. They must be able to recognize typical experiences of loss, understand their impact, and respond with support and care.

Change and Loss

Caught up in their own responsibilities, adults can sometimes forget the emotional intensity children and adolescents experience following a move, fight with a friend, or breakup with a girlfriend. Students that show a sudden or extreme change in behavior after a loss probably are struggling with being able to cope with their

loss. Situations that thrust change upon a child or adolescent, such as those listed here, engender loss and trigger grief responses.

- Death of a family member or close friend
- Divorce
- Parental loss of job
- Moving to a different home—whether near or far
- Destroyed home, such as from a fire or natural disaster
- Disability—genetic or acquired
- Chronic or terminal illness
- Dissolution of a friendship
- Breakup with a boyfriend or girlfriend
- Disappearance or destruction of symbolic or treasured belongings
- Poor performance in academics, athletics, or another field important to the student

What Is Grief?

Grief is a healthy response to the loss of a significant person, place, or thing, encompassing a broad range of emotions and behaviors. These emotions can be intense, difficult, and often overwhelming. Therefore, it's essential to help children understand that what they feel is normal; that they are not strange, weird, or "going crazy." Though there is not a single or "right" way to grieve, common initial responses include shock or denial, followed by numbness, anger, fear, sadness, and finally, acceptance. In time, the emotional response lessens and the person more actively participates in his or her daily social world.

Responding to Grieving Students

Teachers aren't expected to be counselors, nor should they, but they do serve as the significant adults for children in the classroom. In that role, simply being available, observing, and caring while providing a stable, routine environment is crucial to students suffering a loss. You can offer specific and safe responses for grieving students in the following ways:

- Acknowledge the loss privately with the student: "John, I'm sorry that your sister died; Susan, I heard about your parent's divorce. This must be a hard time for you." Though the student may not respond right away, it is important to acknowledge the situation in a caring way.
- Be patient with the student—and yourself (the situation also may be awkward for you).
- Avoid setting a timetable for recovery.
- Help students generate and evaluate choices, rather than lecturing or making decisions for them.
- Provide quiet moments for the student to talk with you.
- Let the student know that what he or she is experiencing emotionally is normal.
- Help the student find nonverbal means of expression, such as drawing, making collages, journal writing, or creating a memory book.
- Be encouraging.
- Continue routines and discipline—they give students needed stability.
- Retain high expectations for the student.
- Be as honest as possible.
- Speak with compassion, not pity or condescension.
- Acknowledge changes in your classroom, such as a student moving away, and allow students to say goodbye. Direct changes into teachable mo-

ments that equip students to deal with loss and understand it is normal.

- Refer a student not progressing through the grief process to the school counselor.

A supportive, emotionally safe environment helps a grieving person come to terms with the loss and develop healthy ways of dealing with losses. 🍌

Resources

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Grief-Related Behaviors

Young Children

- stomachaches
- nausea
- headaches
- changes in appetite
- poor sleep
- tiredness
- social withdrawal or avoidance
- emotional outbursts
- increased dependency
- difficulty listening and focusing on tasks
- school avoidance
- tantrums
- crying
- emotional or behavioral regression
- acting "too good"

Adolescents

- increased distrust of others
- irritability
- despair
- apathy
- forgetfulness
- restlessness
- inappropriate laughter or boisterous behavior
- heightened sensitivity
- chest pains
- loss of interest in peer activities
- oppositional or defiant behavior
- hyperactivity
- acting "too good"