



The Compassionate Friends Victoria, Australia

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Suggestions for Teachers and School Counsellors

Teachers, counsellors and classmates make up a student's "second family." The whole school community can have strong feelings when a member of the community experiences a death. These guidelines have been prepared by bereaved parents, surviving children, school personnel and professional caregivers in an effort to help those who want to help a child.

Children tend to express grief in their ways of behaving. They act out their feelings and emotions. We cannot always know what they are thinking or feeling. Take cues from their behaviour.

All students react differently. Withdrawal, aggressiveness, panic, anxiety, anger, guilt, fear, regression and symptoms of bodily distress are all signs of grief. Be patient and understanding.

When children are grieving, they have shortened attention spans and may have trouble concentrating. Schoolwork may be affected. A student may attempt to deny feelings of anger, hurt and fear by repressing them. Eventually, grief takes over and their feelings leak out. It may be months or even years before a child displays signs of the full impact of a family death.

The bereaved student must re-establish a self-identity. "Who am I? Where do I fit into my family now?" becomes a major concern. Help them in their search.

A student's perceptions of death change with age and experience. The preschool and kindergarten age child may see death as temporary. The 6-to-10-year-old becomes aware of the reality and finality of death and may be curious about death and burial rituals. By 11 a child begins to perceive death on an adult level.

If a student seeks you out to talk, be available and REALLY LISTEN. Hear with your ears, your eyes and your heart. A warm hug says, "I know what happened and I care. I am here if you need me".

Face your own feelings about death. Share your feelings with the student and with your class. It's okay to cry, to be sad or angry. It is even okay to smile.

Be open and honest with feelings. Create an atmosphere of open acceptance that invites questions and fosters confidence and love. Encourage children to express their grief in all its forms.

Acknowledge the reality that grief hurts. Do not attempt to rescue the student (or the class, or yourself!) from that hurt. Be supportive and available.

Provide a quiet, private place to come to whenever the student needs to be alone. Almost anything can trigger tears. Respect a student's need to grieve. Help students realize that grief is a natural and normal reaction to loss.

Do not isolate or insulate students from death; expose them to death as a natural part of life. Use such opportunities as a fallen leaf, a wilted flower, the death of an insect, bird or class pet to discuss death as a part of the life cycle. Explore feelings about death, loss and grief through books. Talk together as a classroom family.

Remember, the class functions as a group, and sharing grief may benefit the entire class. Thus students can be exposed to death in a safe and caring atmosphere, where the grieving child finds people who care and are supportive.

By sharing grief, we help eliminate the compounding problem of school and social isolation the bereaved often experience.

Try not to single out the grieving child for special privileges or compensations. He still needs to feel a part of his peer group and should be expected to function accordingly. Temper your expectations with kindness and understanding, but continue to expect him to function.

Friends may be uncomfortable and awkward, if possible, meet with a few of the bereaved student's friends, to help them cope and explore how to be supportive.

Help the student find a supportive peer group. Perhaps there are other students in the school who are coping with similar losses. An invitation to share with each other might be welcome.

Have resources available in the library about death and grief. You might offer to read with the student.

Become a part of a caring team by establishing lines of communication with the parents. Keep each other informed about the student's progress.

It is important and appropriate for the school community to acknowledge the death of a student. Encourage classroom discussions and expressions of grief, such as a display of poems, pictures or drawings. Make a scrapbook, hold an assembly, plant a tree. Do something to acknowledge the death, thus giving students permission to do the same.

Children and young people will continue to deal with the death of a family member as they grow and mature. Continue to be available. Continue to reach out and CARE, just as you do now.