

# Supporting Grieving Students: A Guide for Educators

What teachers, counselors, and school staff need to know

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## Why This Guide Matters

By the time they reach high school, most students will experience the death of someone close to them. An estimated 1 in 15 children in the United States will lose a parent or sibling before age 18. Schools are the one place where children spend the majority of their waking hours, making educators among the most important adults in a grieving child's life.

Research from the American Psychological Association (2022) shows that approximately 20% of bereaved children develop serious long-term problems, including depression and elevated suicide risk. Early identification and support in school settings can significantly improve outcomes. This guide is designed to help you recognize grief, respond appropriately, and know when to refer a student for professional help.

### Key Principles for Educators

- You do not need to be a therapist. Your presence, consistency, and willingness to listen are powerful.
- Grief is not linear. A student may seem fine for weeks, then struggle on an anniversary or holiday.
- Behavior changes are often grief in disguise. Academic decline, withdrawal, or acting out may signal distress.
- Cultural sensitivity matters. Families grieve differently based on cultural, religious, and personal factors.

## What the Research Tells Us

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) distinguishes between normal childhood bereavement and childhood traumatic grief. In normal bereavement, children move through grief at their own pace, alternating between grieving and engaging in normal activities. In traumatic grief, the circumstances of the death (violence, accidents, sudden loss) can cause trauma symptoms that interfere with the normal grief process. Children with traumatic grief may experience intrusive thoughts, avoidance, and hyperarousal that prevent them from processing their loss.

The APA (2022) identifies several evidence-based treatments effective for childhood grief and trauma, including Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT) and the Family Bereavement Program. Research by Irwin Sandler, PhD, found that quality of parenting and the presence of supportive adults—including teachers—are the primary mediators for reduced mental health problems in bereaved children.

## Recognizing Grief in the Classroom by Age

Children grieve differently depending on their developmental stage. The following age-based guide draws on research from the Dougy Center, the NCTSN, and the Child Mind Institute.

### Pre-K to Kindergarten (Ages 3–5)

#### Understanding of Death:

Death is seen as temporary and reversible. Magical thinking is common—children may believe their thoughts or actions caused the death.

#### Common Grief Behaviors:

- Regression: bedwetting, thumb-sucking, clinging to adults
- Repetitive questions ('When is Daddy coming back?')
- Disrupted sleep, nightmares, separation anxiety
- Acting out grief through play rather than words

#### How Educators Can Help:

- Maintain predictable routines—consistency provides safety
- Use simple, concrete language: 'His body stopped working'
- Allow extra physical closeness and comfort objects
- Offer expressive outlets: drawing, clay, dramatic play

### Elementary School (Ages 6–9)

#### Understanding of Death:

Beginning to understand death is permanent but may still see it as something that only happens to others. Curious about the physical details of death.

#### Common Grief Behaviors:

- Difficulty concentrating, declining academic performance
- Physical complaints: stomachaches, headaches, fatigue
- Fear that other loved ones will die; anxiety about safety
- May try to be 'perfect' or take on a caretaker role

#### How Educators Can Help:

- Check in privately and regularly—grief surfaces in waves
- Modify assignments and testing timelines temporarily
- Answer questions honestly; don't avoid the topic of death
- Allow the student to visit a counselor when needed

## Preteens (Ages 9–12)

### Understanding of Death:

Understands death is universal and permanent. May begin to question fairness and meaning.

### Common Grief Behaviors:

- Withdrawal from peers or sudden changes in friend groups
- Anger, irritability, or emotional outbursts
- Risk-taking or impulsive behavior
- Obsession with details of the death

### How Educators Can Help:

- Respect their need for privacy but remain available
- Normalize complex emotions: anger, guilt, relief are all common
- Connect them with peer support or school grief groups
- Watch for role confusion—some take on 'adult' responsibilities at home

## Teenagers (Ages 13–18)

### Understanding of Death:

Adult-like understanding of death. Grappling with existential questions about mortality, meaning, and identity. Highly self-conscious about being 'different.'

### Common Grief Behaviors:

- Social withdrawal OR increased social activity to avoid grief
- Changes in eating and sleeping patterns
- Academic decline or, conversely, perfectionism
- Substance use, self-harm, or suicidal ideation (requires immediate referral)

### How Educators Can Help:

- Treat them as near-adults; ask what they need rather than assuming
- Offer flexible deadlines without making them ask repeatedly
- Be aware that grief may resurface at milestones (graduation, prom)
- Monitor closely after a peer suicide—contagion risk is real

## What to Say and What Not to Say

The NCTSN and Child Mind Institute emphasize that educators don't need perfect words—they need genuine presence. The most helpful response is calm, honest, and nonjudgmental.

### Helpful Things to Say

- "I'm so sorry this happened. I'm here for you."
- "It's okay to feel however you feel right now."
- "You don't have to talk about it, but I'm here if you want to."
- "There's no right or wrong way to grieve."
- "I noticed you seem to be having a hard day. Want to take a break?"
- "Your mom/dad/brother/sister mattered, and it makes sense that you're hurting."

### Things to Avoid Saying

- "I know how you feel." (You don't.)
- "They're in a better place." (Minimizes pain.)
- "You need to be strong for your family."
- "At least they're not suffering anymore."
- "It's been a while—you should be feeling better."
- "Everything happens for a reason."

## Sample Scripts for Teachers

### When a student returns after a loss:

"I'm glad you're back. I want you to know that I'm sorry about what happened. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to, but I'm here. If you need to step out of class at any point, just give me a signal and you can go to [counselor's name]. I've set aside the work you missed—there's no rush on any of it."

### Addressing the class (with the family's permission):

"I have something sad to share with you. [Student's name]'s [relationship] died. When they come back, they might be feeling sad or might not want to talk about it. The best thing we can do is be kind, include them, and let them know we care. If any of you are feeling sad about this, our counselor [name] is available to talk."

### When you notice a student struggling:

"I've noticed you seem a little different lately, and I wanted to check in. You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to. I just want you to know I see you and I care. Is there anything I can do to help right now?"

## Classroom Activities After a Loss

Age-appropriate memorial and processing activities help normalize grief and give students a constructive outlet. The Child Mind Institute recommends keeping activities brief, voluntary, and tailored by grade level.

### Memorial Activities

- Memory board or poster where students can write or draw memories of the person who died
- Planting a tree or garden as a class—a living memorial that children can tend over time
- Creating a memory book or card collection to give to the bereaved family
- A brief moment of silence or sharing circle (voluntary participation only)

### Processing Activities

- Journaling prompts: 'Today I feel...' or 'Something I want to remember about [person] is...'
- Art expression: drawing feelings, creating collages, painting stones
- Reading age-appropriate books about grief together, then discussing
- Feelings check-in: using a visual 'mood meter' at the start of the day

## When to Refer for Professional Help

Most children will grieve and gradually adjust with the support of caring adults. However, the NCTSN identifies the following as signs that a student may need professional intervention. If any of these persist beyond 4–6 weeks or intensify over time, refer to a school psychologist or counselor who can connect the family with appropriate services.

### Red Flags Requiring Referral

- Persistent inability to function in the classroom (can't concentrate, complete tasks, or engage)
- Complete withdrawal from friends and activities that previously brought joy
- Intense, ongoing sadness or emotional numbness lasting more than several weeks
- Expressed desire to die or join the deceased person
- Significant changes in eating/sleeping that don't improve
- Substance use or self-harm (requires IMMEDIATE referral)
- Repeated aggressive outbursts or destruction of property
- Regression that doesn't resolve (older children acting much younger)

## Creating a Grief-Sensitive Classroom

A grief-sensitive classroom benefits all students, not just those actively grieving. The following practices, recommended by the NCTSN and the APA, create an environment where students

feel safe to learn and to feel.

- **Predictability:** Maintain consistent routines, rules, and expectations. Grieving children need to know that their world at school is stable even when home feels chaotic.
- **Flexibility:** Balance structure with accommodation. Postpone major tests, allow extra time on assignments, and permit breaks when needed.
- **Awareness:** Know your students' loss histories. Be mindful of calendar triggers: Mother's Day and Father's Day projects, family tree assignments, 'what I did this summer' essays can be painful.
- **Communication:** Stay in regular contact with the student's family. Share observations and coordinate support.
- **Self-care:** Monitor your own reactions. Educators who are themselves grieving—or experiencing vicarious grief—need support too. Seek it.

### **Educator Self-Check**

- Have I communicated with this student's family about how they're doing at school?
- Am I watching for delayed grief reactions (anniversaries, holidays, milestones)?
- Have I reviewed upcoming assignments for potential grief triggers?
- Am I modeling that it's okay to talk about loss and to show emotion?
- Do I know who the grief point-person is at my school?

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#### **Sources:**

1. National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Childhood Traumatic Grief: Information for School Personnel: <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/childhood-traumatic-grief-information-for-school-personnel>
2. American Psychological Association, Evidence-Based Practices for Childhood Grief (2022): <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/10/evidence-based-practices-grief>
3. American Psychological Association, Kids and Covid Grief (2022): <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/10/kids-covid-grief>
4. Child Mind Institute, Helping Children Cope With Grief: <https://childmind.org/guide/helping-children-cope-with-grief/>
5. Dougy Center, Developmental Responses to Grief: <https://www.dougy.org/assets/uploads/Developmental-Responses-to-Grief-ages-2-18.pdf>