Grief and Loss in the Classroom

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MY CLASS!
Regrets and Fears

I said he didn’t have to be scared,
I said he shouldn’t worry.
WHERE ARE YOU AT?

Think for a moment

Do you know what you would do?

Do you know your district procedures?

Do you know who you should contact at your school site?

Do you fear death?

Can you talk about death or even sadness with children?

Is anyone going through this at the moment?
Use Care in Choosing Your Words

- Use words such as “death,” “die,” or “dying” in your conversations and avoid euphemisms such as “they went away,” “they are sleeping,” “departed,” and “passed away.” Such euphemisms are abstract and may be confusing, especially for younger children.
- Be brief and patient. Remember that you may have to answer the same question multiple times and repeat key information to ensure understanding.
- Listen, acknowledge feelings, and be nonjudgmental.
- Express your own feelings in an open, calm, and appropriate way that encourages students to share their feelings and grief.
- Avoid making assumptions and imposing your own beliefs on students.
- A variety of feelings are normal. Be sensitive to each student’s experience, as there is no one right way to respond to a loss. Feelings and behaviors will vary across students and will change throughout the bereavement process.
The linear stages of grief are a myth.

Children and teenagers will need ongoing attention, reassurance and support. It is not unusual for grief to resurface later on, even well after the death. This can happen as they move through different life milestones, and develop as individuals.

If you are concerned about any extreme reactions, or if you think the young person may have become depressed, contact a school counsellor, school administration, social worker, community or youth worker or a local family support agency.
Local help

The Grande Prairie and District Grief Support Association

https://www.facebook.com/gpgriefsupport/

Grande Prairie Suicide Prevention Resource Center

https://www.sp-rc.ca/resources/itemlist/category/28-grief-and-loss

Olivers Funeral Home Grief Support Resources

http://www.oliversfuneralhome.com/grande-prairie-grief-support.php
Primary school children

- Still learning to understand death and can have some confused thoughts about it.
- They may think death is temporary, or that the person who has died may still feel things, such as coldness, hunger or loneliness etc.
- They may ask where the person is now, and have blunt questions to ask about what happened to them and to their body.
- Explaining death to them is very important.
Common Reactions - Primary Children

- Looking for the person who has died
- Blaming themselves for the death
- Being anxious; having increased fears, such as of the dark, of others' safety
- Clinginess – wanting to be near you or others more
- Withdrawing, being quiet, showing a lack of response
- Being fretful, distressed, not wanting to go to school
- Feeling embarrassment; feeling different from others; may conceal their loss
- Physical complaints, such as tummy aches, headaches, aching
- Being irritable, having more tantrums, being defiant, or developing antisocial or aggressive behaviour
- Changes in eating or sleeping habits
- Toileting problems, bed wetting, soiling
How to help Primary age Children

- frequently reassure them they are safe, and who is looking after them
- keep routines and normal activities going as much as possible
- tell them you know they are sad – start to use words that describe feelings
- keep separated from them as little as possible
- allow questions and provide honest answers
- comfort them with hugs, cuddles, holding their hand, and by encouraging them
- speak calmly and gently to them – and be calm around them
- explain death as part of life, so they come to understand it bit by bit. Using some examples in nature may be helpful, such as watching plants grow, bloom and die or seasons change
- provide comfort items, such as a cuddly toy, special blanket etc
Common Reactions - Older children (8 – 12 years)

All of the past reactions also relate to this age group, but it’s important to be aware that by this age children know death is final. They are also more aware of how adults and others around them are reacting to death. This group may also:

- be especially anxious about the safety of family and friends, and themselves
- try very hard to please adults and not worry them, and so not let themselves grieve
- feel stronger emotional reactions, such as anger, guilt, sense of rejection
- want to take on more adult responsibilities, trying very hard to please
- feel embarrassment; feel different from peers; may conceal their loss
- become more focused on what’s happened and ask questions, think about it a lot, have dreams about it, and perhaps want to talk about it often to others
Older children - How to Help

- time to talk with you and other trusted adults, when they need to
- regular reassurance – spoken, and with encouraging physical touch (such as hugs, pat on the back etc).
- honesty about events, and feelings
- to know you understand their grief
- regular encouragement
- avoid expectations of adult behaviour – allow them to be the age and stage they are
Teenagers

- By adolescence, death is accepted as part of life, but it may not have affected a teenager personally yet. Their reactions may fluctuate between earlier age group reactions and reactions that are more adult.
- Teenagers will often want to be more with friends than family as they seek support. They may find the intensity of emotion overwhelming or scary and not be able to find the words or ways to talk about them with others. They may want to feel they're coping, and be seen to be, but inside be hurting a great deal, or be putting their emotions on a shelf for a later time.
- Death can so shake teens that some react with risk taking behaviour – to escape the feelings and reality and as a source of comfort; for example, drinking, drugs, more sexual contact or reckless driving.
Teenagers! Common reactions

- being easily distracted, forgetful
- having difficulty concentrating at school
- being unsettled in class, a change in class performance, not wanting to go to school
- being overwhelmed by intense reactions, such as anger, guilt, fear
- having difficulty expressing intensity of emotions, or conflict of emotions
- blaming themselves for the death
- anxiety – increased fears about others' safety, and their own
- having questions or concerns about death, dying, mortality
- wanting to be near family or friends more
- withdrawing to be alone
- physical complaints, such as tummy aches, headaches, aching
- being irritable, defiant, more antisocial or displaying aggressive behaviour
- risk-taking behaviour to escape, to comfort, or to prove they’re alive and strong; for example, drinking, drugs, more sexual contact or reckless driving
Teenagers... MORE!

- changes in eating, sleeping habits
- bedwetting
- jokes or humour, masking feelings
- saying, or acting like, they don’t care
- wanting to take on more adult responsibilities, trying very hard to please
- strained relationships with others – fear or awkwardness about being close to others
- feeling embarrassment; feeling different from peers; may conceal their loss
- a sense of loneliness – isolation
- a change in self-image, lower self-esteem
- possibly suicidal thoughts
- possibly moving from sadness into depression
Teenagers!!! How to help

• be honest and let them know what's happening
• be willing to listen, and available to talk about whatever they need to talk about
• acknowledge the emotions they may be feeling—fear, sadness, anger
• it can be helpful for parents, or other adults, to share their own feelings regarding the loss
• frequently reassure them they are safe, who is caring for them, and which adults they can trust to ask for further support
• keep routines and normal activities going as much as possible
• talk to them about grief – what it is, that it’s normal, that everyone is different
• avoid expectations of adult behaviour – allow them to be the age and stage they are, encourage them to express their thoughts and feelings - give them ideas of things they could try, such as doing physical activities, writing, singing, listening to music, talking with friends, reading etc
• allow questions and provide honest answers
• by encouraging them
• speak calmly and gently to them – and be calm around them
• talk about death together; answer any questions they may have
• let them help in planning something to remember the loss
What is a Grief Box?

Grief comes in waves, deeply sad, overwhelming for a time, but not the end and not the only thing in their life. In your classroom a grief box can be that place to think thoughts, write things down, let tears fall, and then come back to your class and still be a kid. A private and safe place to be sad and know they are welcome to return when they are ready.

A grief box can be a teacher’s resource for that unexpected horrible moment when sadness slips into your room… and you don’t know what to do next.

Most items can be found at dollar stores. Remember to keep this box stocked and do not borrow from it, you never know when you will need them.
GRIEF BOX SUPPLIES

Picture books (see suggested books [https://childbereavement.org/resources/bibliography.html](https://childbereavement.org/resources/bibliography.html))

Remembrance journals- free on TPT
small pocket-sized notebook
fidget toys, stress balls, comfort birds, and playdough

Art or craft supplies

- Small paper mâché type boxes – for making into individual memory boxes
- Sketch books
- crayons, pencil crayons, markers
- paints, scissors, glue, buttons, foam shapes, feathers, small flowers for decorating journals or boxes
- Large size index cards to fold and make into sympathy cards
- Box to contain sympathy cards to decorate and give to family

Memory Lantern supplies:
small jar (with or without a lid), tissue paper (orange/yellow), white glue, a paint brush for spreading the glue, pencil or pen, battery powered votive light
Memory Lantern

“A grandmother passed away and this resulted in some sad children. We made a memory lantern. Writing down all the words that came to mind when remembering her life, the students seemed comforted and took the keepsake home where it is kept as a memorial. It also continues to serve as a nightlight. I love how everything is ready to go and so easy to figure out.”
What My students Want you to know

We are all different.
Sometimes we are happy.
And we feel sad about it.
And sometimes we are sad.
Like really sad.
Sometimes we want to be alone.
Sometimes we want to forget for a minute.
Check in and see what we need.
Sometimes we want to talk.

Life is always going to be different.
But one day we will remember mom and smile without feeling crying, like yesterday, yesterday I remembered and smiled.
You can’t make it go away. It is part of us.
You can’t fix it.
A plan

- Contact your administration for first steps about your district policy and who you can look to for support (in PWSD you would contact an inclusive learning coach and your administration)
- Ask about support for a Grief box for your school
- Gather your resources, books and supplies—make yourself aware of what is on site (ask your librarian)
- Place all items in a central or well marked area
- Hands off these items so that they will remain at the ready
- In primary grades several science units might help lead you into discussion about death, and dying—be open to this and try not to avoid it
- Plan a location where students who experience some sort of loss or grieving might go— in the classroom? In the office?
“After one of our students died, I read many of the books to the kids. They always started good conversations. I wasn’t sure how to talk about grieving, with the kids, and these books got everything started.”
Thank you

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EDUCATE THE HEART