

School Staff's Guidelines for Supporting Students during Grief

Key Points:

- You are a competent professional when it comes to working with children. You may not be an expert in dealing with grief but you have considerable skills and training with children's concerns.
- It is okay for staff to feel uncomfortable about dealing with a loss situation and to ask for help
- It is okay for staff to show their feelings and for students to see you cry. It normalizes the grief response and feelings students are experiencing.
- You may not have one perfect response to grief, indeed there may not even be one perfect response. You can listen carefully and offer children an opportunity to express their feelings and allow children to go to the guidance office.
- You are placed in a demanding role. It may be painful personally for you to face your students. Support staff and other resources are available to help you.

Ways to Help:

- Be patient and compassionate- the grieving process is sporadic and occurs over time
- Listen
- Observe changes in behavior
- Be honest, but do not give unnecessary details
- Talk about feelings associated with grief. Let students know that there is no one "correct" response
- Be responsive to feelings and refer students to support staff when appropriate

Needs of the Grieving Child

- To be allowed to grieve
- To have their loss acknowledged and validated
- To be given accurate and appropriate information
- Careful listening
- Help with overwhelming feelings
- Continuation of routine activities
- Opportunities to remember

Helping Yourself Through Grief

- Be Patient with Yourself (Grief takes time... whatever time it takes)
- Ask and Accept Help
- Accept Yours Feelings
- Be Good to Yourself (pay attention to nutrition, rest, exercise, time with supportive people)

Understanding the Grief Cycle

Children grieve sporadically. Every child's grief experience is unique and individual. It is not so much as a forward progression through the grief cycle but a working through grief. These are some common experiences:

- shock and denial
- protest and strong emotions
- disorientation
- deep sadness (hopelessness, fear of failure, aimlessness, irritability)
- acceptance and adjustment

Typical Responses to loss from Younger Children:

How children react will depend on the relationship they had with the person who died, their age, and their prior experience with death. Preschool age children do not understand that death is final and may confuse death with sleep or someone taking a trip. They may show greater interest in things that are dead. As children reach elementary age, they do begin to understand that death is final and this concept often creates more fear and sadness. Children in both age groups typically have difficulty expressing their feelings verbally as they either do not have the ability to do so or find that talking about death is too anxiety provoking. Children will often display their feelings in their behavior and play, so it is important to be more watchful of how they act and what they do rather than what they say.

Typical Responses to loss from Adolescents:

As children get older, their responses begin to resemble adult reactions to trauma but may also have a combination of some more childlike reactions mixed with adult responses. Their own personal histories with loss will contribute to their reactions. Most adolescents know that death is final and universal. While they are more knowledgeable that life is fragile, they tend to believe that they are immortal and invincible which can lead to risk-taking behavior. Adolescents may blame themselves. Teens may romanticize death and fantasize about their own death and reaction of others. They may not show their feelings for fear of appearing weak or needing to appear in control of their feelings. Some responses/feelings may include:

- physical complaints,
- behaving impulsively
- arguing, screaming, fighting
- allowing themselves to be in dangerous situations
- acting like it never happened
- confusion or poor concentration,
- aggressiveness,
- withdrawal,
- sleep and appetite disturbance,
- decreases in energy level,
- shock
- indifference
- depression,
- feelings of vulnerability and anxiety (maybe this could happen to me)
- anxiety
- loneliness
- anger
- sadness
- abandonment
- guilt
- fearfulness
- worry
- isolation

Some other thoughts to consider: If you have particular concerns about a child and their ability to cope right now, please contact their school counselor. Support is available for staff at the school as well during this particularly difficult time. Additional resources can be obtained at www.tigconsortium.org.