

Supporting students through grief and loss

Practical guidance for educators

Grief is a universal part of life, and many children will experience loss while they are at school. Educators play an important role in creating a safe, steady environment where students can continue learning while feeling supported.

Grief shows up differently at school

- Grief is not only about death. Children may be grieving changes in family, relationships, health, routines, or life stages.
- Students can respond in very different ways, including sadness, anger, withdrawal, restlessness, or seeming unaffected.
- A child's reaction may not look the way adults expect grief to look.

In the classroom

- Avoid assumptions about how a student is coping based on behaviour alone.
- Understand that changes in concentration, energy, or emotions can be part of a normal grief response.
- Remember that two students experiencing similar losses may react in completely different ways.

Lead with empathy, not explanations

- Empathy is about acknowledging a student's experience without trying to fix or minimise it.
- It is not necessary to fully understand what a student is feeling in order to be supportive.
- Language matters, even when words feel inadequate.

Helpful language

- "I'm really sorry this has happened."
- "That sounds really hard."
- "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."
- Sitting with a student, offering quiet presence, or checking in later can be just as powerful as talking.

Support without trying to take the pain away

- It is not an educator's role to resolve grief or remove difficult emotions.
- Grieving is a personal process that students need space to experience in their own way.
- Attempts to distract, rush acceptance, or "cheer up" a student can unintentionally minimise their experience.

In practice

- Maintain predictable routines where possible, as structure can be grounding.
- Offer choices, such as stepping outside briefly or having a quiet space.
- Let the student lead how much they want to share.

Expect grief to come and go

- Grief is not linear. Students may move between different emotional states over time.
- Some days they may appear settled, other days distressed, even weeks or months later.
- This is a normal part of grieving, not a failure to cope.

What this means at school

- Be patient if a student's emotions or behaviour fluctuate.
- Try not to interpret emotional responses as defiance or lack of effort.
- Respond with curiosity and calm rather than correction when possible.

Be mindful of relationships and boundaries

- In close-knit or smaller communities, many people may want to support a student or family at once.
- While this support is well intentioned, it can become overwhelming.
- Clear communication and coordination can help protect the student's space.

For schools

- Follow agreed processes for communication with families.
- Avoid sharing information beyond what has been approved.
- Where possible, identify a key contact person rather than multiple people approaching the student.

Keeping connected with parents and carers

- Gently share observations about how the child is coping at school, rather than assumptions.
- Invite parents and carers to share what they are noticing at home, recognising children may present differently across settings.
- Where possible, agree on consistent routines, language, or supports to help the child feel steady between school and home.
- If concerns arise, collaborate to plan next steps together.



Grief and loss resources for you and your community



30 min webinar: 4 ways to support kids and teens through grief



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