



Backgrounder: Grief at School

The Scope of Childhood Grief

Childhood bereavement is more common than many may realize. In the U.S., approximately one in 20 children will lose a parent by age 16, and the vast majority of children will experience the loss of a family member or friend by the time they complete high school. Accordingly, most educators interact with grieving students every year – whether in the classroom, the guidance counselor’s office, or the schoolyard.

School and Grieving Students

Schools have a critical role to play in the grief journey of children who have lost a loved one. Children spend the majority of their waking weekday hours at school, and grieving children are keenly aware of the reactions of others. The responses of school staff, teachers, and classmates can have a large impact on how a student processes his or her loss. Moreover, for grieving students whose needs are being overlooked at home and/or who may be looked to for support by others in the family, school may become the principal place to receive care and attention from trusted adults.

Unfortunately, grief often takes a heavy toll on children at school and can have a serious impact on learning:

- For school-age children, grief can manifest itself in decreased academic performance, social withdrawal, and new behavioral problems.
- In a survey of educators conducted in 2012 by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the New York Life Foundation, a majority of teachers reported frequently witnessing a negative effect on academic performance and an uptick in behavioral issues when a student lost a parent or guardian.
- Up to 10 percent of grieving children show sustained prolonged grief up to 3 years after the death of a parent (Melhem et al., 2011; Archives of General Psychiatry).

Greater Support Needed

Despite the fact that there are millions of grieving students sitting in classrooms across America each day, most educators have not been trained on the issue of childhood bereavement. While nearly seven in 10 teachers (69%) currently have at least one grieving student in their classroom(s), only 7 percent have had any amount of bereavement training (AFT-NYL 2012 Educators’ Survey).

LEAD FOUNDING MEMBERS

National Center for School Crisis & Bereavement • New York Life Foundation

FOUNDING MEMBERS

AASA, The School Superintendents Association • American Federation of School Administrators (AFSA) • American Federation of Teachers (AFT)
American School Counselor Association (ASCA) • National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) • National Association of School Nurses (NASN)
National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) • National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)
National Education Association Health Information Network (NEA HIN) • School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA)



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Yet 92 percent of educators – including teachers, aides, counselors and staff – say childhood grief is a serious problem that deserves more attention from schools. It is clear that teachers desire but currently lack the knowledge of how to support the grieving students in their midst – the single greatest barrier preventing them from reaching out and offering support.

How Educators Can Make a Difference

By taking simple steps to express care and concern, educators have a tremendous opportunity to serve as a source of support and stability during a difficult time in their grieving students' lives. Importantly, educators do not need to serve as grief counselors; in fact, they can often help the most by simply being present with and attentive to grieving students as they express their feelings.

Steps that educators can take to improve outcomes for their grieving students include the following:

- Help younger students understand what has happened and help them identify skills and resources to cope;
- Invite older students to talk, and provide support over time, remaining present when they are ready for a conversation;
- Give students space to express themselves, avoiding comments that seek to cheer them up or diminish the weight of their loss;
- Reach out to parents or caregivers to express support and communicate how the child is faring at school;
- Proactively offer extra learning supports; and
- Provide basic guidance to the student's classmates on how to respond to their peer with care.

Additional resources for supporting grieving students can be found at grievingstudents.org.