



Other Reactions

Take-Home Message

Reactions to death vary greatly in children. Learning how children understand and feel about a loss is a useful way to determine how to best help them cope. Children's thoughts and feelings can help explain their behaviors both immediately after a death and after some time has passed. School professionals are able to intervene in more appropriate ways when actions that might be perceived as misbehaviors are understood in the context of a student's reaction to a death.

A Range of Reactions

Other modules in this section address the learning challenges children often experience after a death, as well as the guilt and shame commonly seen in grieving students. (See Impact on Learning and Guilt and Shame.) After a death, students may express a range of other reactions as well, including the following.

Little or No Reaction

Some students appear to have little or no reaction at all after the death of someone important in their lives. They may actually be making an extraordinary effort to keep their emotions hidden from others. Often, they do a very convincing job. Adults in their lives may be unaware of their distress.

This does not mean they are not greatly affected by the death. It is important not to rely solely on children's behaviors to assess how they are doing. Conversations, check-ins, and invitations to ask questions or discuss feelings can be useful for all students.



Nonverbal Reactions

Many children express their feelings in ways other than talking. Very young children often work through their feelings during play. Older children may use creative activities such as writing, role-playing, or art to express their thoughts and feelings.

While play and creative activities can provide important clues to children's thoughts and feelings, adults should be careful not to jump to conclusions. For example, children who draw only happy scenes after a traumatic loss might give the impression they are not affected by the events. In actuality, they may instead be giving a sign that they are not yet ready to process or express their grief.

Rather than interpreting children's play or creative work, consider asking them to describe what their work is about or what story they are telling.

Anger

Children may express anger after a death and look to assign blame to others. These reactions may be an attempt to establish control in response to an overwhelming experience.

Parents and other family members are often the targets of such anger. They are close by. They are also relatively safe because they are likely to be more tolerant of emotional outbursts. Children may feel anger at their parents for not protecting them from personal tragedy.

Children may also direct anger toward the person who died. They may feel abandoned, or be angry about negative consequences and secondary losses that resulted from the death.

The death of a loved one can also result in anger at God. Children may question even strongly held spiritual beliefs.

It is important to normalize feelings of anger and encourage grieving children to express their feelings in non-harmful ways. When children understand that people often feel angry after a death, they are less likely to feel guilty or ashamed of their feelings.

Preexisting Challenges

Preexisting learning, emotional, or behavioral challenges may resurface or worsen after a death.

Normalize such setbacks for grieving children—they are common. Help plan extra supports from professionals with the school and community as students learn to cope with their loss.

(Continued)

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Risky Behaviors

Older children and teens may engage in risky behaviors such as drinking alcohol or using other substances, engaging in risky sexual activity, or participating in violent or delinquent behavior. This often reflects their struggle to master an increase in feelings of personal vulnerability after the death of someone close to them.

Invite these students to think about possible links between the risks they are taking and their feelings about their loss. When the risky behaviors persist, or when they are serious, refer students to appropriate mental health professionals.

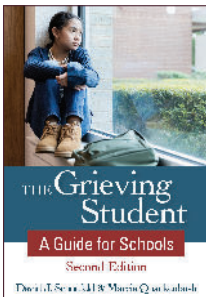
Acting Younger

In the aftermath of a death, children may begin to act more like they did at an earlier age. Children who were comfortable with independence may become sensitive to separation from surviving family members. For example, a kindergarten student who tolerated being left at school may become clingy after a death.

Adults often expect children to become more generous and considerate of the needs of others at times of crisis. In

reality, however, when under significant stress, children often focus more on their personal needs, at least at first. They may act more immature, self-centered or demanding, and be less tolerant of change.

Once children's needs are met and they are feeling more secure, they are likely to feel more capable and able to attend to the needs of others. Over time, they will return to developmentally appropriate behavior, including an interest in seeking increased personal independence.



For more information on supporting grieving students, refer to *The Grieving Student: A Guide for Schools* by David Schonfeld and Marcia Quackenbush.

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