

ADDRESSING GRIEF IN CHILDREN: TIPS FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS

Grief can result from many types of loss (e.g., death, divorce, transitions). How children grieve can be influenced by age, cultural traditions, religious beliefs, mental health, disabilities, and other factors. Grieving does not have a timeline, and schools and families should be aware of anniversaries, birthdays, developmental milestones, and other factors that could affect students months or years after the loss.

AGE AND DEVELOPMENTAL GRIEF REACTIONS

Preschool

Acting out, regressive behaviors, being more quiet than usual, increased anxiety

Elementary School

Difficulty in school performance or attendance, sleeping, eating; irritability, aggression, and disruptive behaviors; social withdrawal; guilt, depression, and anxiety; repeated retelling of events

Middle & High School

Difficulty in school performance or attendance; avoidance, withdrawal, high-risk behaviors or substance abuse; difficulty with peer relations, nightmares, flashbacks, emotional numbing, or depression

GRIEF MILESTONES

Children may experience and reexperience:

- Acceptance of the loss
- Feelings/emotional pain
- Adjusting to changes/altered environments
- Finding ways to remember/memorialize the deceased



ADDITIONAL ATTENTION

Children exhibiting the following might require additional attention:

- Loss of interest in daily activities
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Wishing to be with the deceased loved one
- Fear of being alone
- Significant decreases in school performance or attendance
- Increased physical complaints



HOW TO HELP

- Maintain normal routines as much as possible.
- Ask questions to determine the child's understanding of the event and emotional state.
- Give the child permission to grieve.
- Provide age and developmentally appropriate answers/support.
- Connect the child with professionals and other trusted adults.
- Help children adopt healthy coping strategies.



THINGS TO AVOID

- Inaccurate descriptions when referring to the deceased, such as "They are sleeping," or "They went away" (Note: While as a rule euphemisms should be avoided, sensitivity to cultural differences is important)
- Reducing the loss (e.g., "It was just your great aunt")
- Imposing a time frame to complete the grieving process
- Overidentifying (e.g., "I know how you feel")
- Oversharing (e.g., "When I lost my mom to cancer"); not everyone handles loss and grief the same way

