

THE Grieving Student

A Teacher's Guide

by

David J. Schonfeld, M.D.

National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement
Division of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics
Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, Ohio

and

Marcia Quackenbush, M.S., MFT, CHES

ETR Associates
Scotts Valley, California

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BROOKES
PUBLISHING CO[®]

Baltimore • London • Sydney

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About the Authors

David J. Schonfeld, M.D., Director, National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement (NCSCB) and Director, Division of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, has provided consultation, technical assistance, and training in the areas of pediatric bereavement and school crisis preparedness and response for more than 20 years. He has provided presentations at national and international meetings and worked with communities throughout the United States and abroad (including Europe, Great Britain, Asia, the Middle East, Scandinavia, Latin America, and Africa). In 1991, Dr. Schonfeld established the School Crisis Response Program at Yale University School of Medicine, where he provided training to tens of thousands of school-based personnel throughout the country and technical assistance in hundreds of school crisis events. Dr. Schonfeld has consulted with schools during the aftermath of numerous school (including school shootings and other school violence) and national crisis events. From 2001 to 2004, he consulted to the New York City Department of Education and coordinated training for school crisis teams in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and provided training to more than 1,000 district- and school-level crisis teams within the system. In 2005, Dr. Schonfeld was awarded funding by the September 11th Children's Fund and the National Philanthropic Trust to establish the NCSCB. Dr. Schonfeld has worked with schools coping with large-scale natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005; Hurricane Ike in Galveston, Texas, in 2008; and the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan, China. Dr. Schonfeld is currently a member of the National Commission on Children and Disasters, the Disaster Mental Health Subcommittee of the National Biodefense Science Board, and the American Academy of Pediatrics's Disaster Preparedness Advisory Council. He is actively engaged in school-based research involving children's understanding of and adjustment to serious illness and death and school-based interventions to promote adjustment and risk prevention.

Marcia Quackenbush, M.S., MFT, CHES, Senior Editor and Health Education Specialist, ETR Associates, Scotts Valley, California, is a licensed family therapist and certified health education specialist. She has more than 15 years of clinical mental health experience, much of which is focused on children, adolescents, and families of people living with life-changing condition; or people coping with terminal illness in themselves or family members. Ms. Quackenbush has written extensively in the health education field, publishing numerous articles and books on a range of topics.

About the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

The NCSCB was founded in 2005 with generous support from the September 11th Children's Fund and the National Philanthropic Trust. It has provided support services to schools across the country. The goals of the NCSCB are to promote an appreciation of the role schools can serve to support students, staff, and families at times of crisis and loss; to link efforts to provide trauma-related and bereavement support services within school settings; to collaborate with professional organizations, governmental and nongovernmental agencies, and community groups to further these goals; and to serve as a resource for information, training materials, consultation, and technical assistance. Learn more at <http://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/svc/alpha/s/school-crisis>.

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Support for Grieving Children

What to Do

Schools and teachers can take concrete steps that will help bereaved children. These include understanding how to be present with and express support for grieving children. Communicating clearly and effectively with children and their families is key. It is also essential to remember that grief is a painful process. There is nothing that anyone—family member, teacher, therapist—can say or do that will take away the pain or make the loss less powerful. That is not the goal of bereavement interventions.

GOALS OF INTERVENTION

What are the goals for teachers who are taking steps to give grieving children and their families support? They involve helping children in the areas that are most likely to present challenges after the death of a family member or friend. The following are six goals for teachers helping grieving children:

1. *Decrease the sense of isolation.* Grieving children may pull back from family members because they do not understand or are not sure how to respond to the grief everyone is experiencing. They may not want their own feelings to create more of a burden. They may feel guilt or shame associated with the loss. If the person who died was a family member, they may wonder what their role is in the new structure of the family.

Grieving children also often pull back from peers because they cannot quite relate the experience of a death to their relationships with peers. They may not know what to say about the death or their grief. They may feel uncomfortable at the attention people give them or with friends' attempts to offer support. Or, they may be uncomfortable because their peers seem to be ignoring their loss. They may feel distracted or overwhelmed and less able to keep up with the usual social give-and-take of their friends. They do not want to be singled out or seen as a victim. At the same time, peers may be reluctant to reach out to their grieving friends because they are unsure what to say or how to be of support. This can be a lonely and troubling consequence of children's grief. When teachers address the topic of death in school, either as

planned coursework or in response to teachable moments, they provide all children with knowledge, skills, and increased comfort so that they are more able to share their feelings and receive and offer support.

2. *Increase academic function.* Common responses to death include difficulty concentrating, easy distractibility, frustration, anger, difficulty sleeping, anxiety, and feelings of sadness. It is easy for school performance to slide under these circumstances. Support that helps children cope with their feelings also prepares them to move forward academically.
3. *Increase the likelihood children will talk with their family.* The most important source of support for grieving children is their family. Many families, however, are unsure about how to talk about a death with their children. Children may not realize these conversations are important or may not know how to get started. When children have opportunities to talk with teachers and identify their feelings, communicate their concerns, and hear words of support in response, they learn how helpful this can be and appreciate that adults are prepared to provide support. This can encourage them to seek more support from their family as well.
4. *Increase the likelihood of talk and support among peers.* Students who have participated in lessons about death and grief will understand more about the process and may be more comfortable reaching out to a peer who has experienced a loss. Students who have previously *given* support to a grieving peer may be more open to receiving similar support themselves if they experience a loss. Students who see a teacher talking with a bereaved student, even if they do not know the details of the conversation, have a role model that shows them that contact is important. When grieving students are more comfortable talking about their experiences, perhaps because they have received support to do so from a teacher, they are more likely to reach out to peers as well.
5. *Identify problems in the family.* Often children provide information that brings to light difficulties within the family. Sometimes the most helpful intervention for a child is an appropriate referral for a parent struggling with depression or anxiety.
6. *Connect with students on something of immense importance.* Students respect their teachers and emulate them when they believe their teachers genuinely care about their welfare. There are few gestures that can express caring more effectively than paying attention to a child's needs after the death of a family member or friend.

These goals may sound like a lot to aim for, but they can be achieved in fairly simple ways that do not usually require a great deal of time.

BEING WITH GRIEVING CHILDREN

As a culture, we do not often talk openly about death and the grief process, especially when children are involved. Because of this, it can be difficult to

understand something as straightforward as how to *be* with children who are grieving. What does one say? How should one act? What if you have feelings of your own about this loss? What if you *don't* feel strongly about it?

The following are some suggestions for how to act and what to say to grieving children:

- *Be present and authentic.* Children are sensitive to dishonesty, and they can often tell if someone is not being truthful. Being genuine involves finding ways to show concerns and emotions that ring true for both the teacher and the children. Most teachers have emotional reactions when they hear a student has suffered the loss of a close family member or a friend. A teacher who is upset and tries not to show it will not be as effective as one who can speak directly about these feelings. A teacher might say, “I was sorry to hear about your brother’s death. I feel very sad that he died. I know you must have some feelings about this, too. Would you like to talk about your brother or tell me what these last few days have been like?”

Similarly, someone who does not have a strong emotional response should not try to manufacture one. There are effective ways to express caring and concern for children in both circumstances that leave the door open for children to recognize the support. When done properly, children can trust the genuine concern and understand that teachers are interested in hearing more from them. For example, if a teacher did not know the person who died, it would not be appropriate to say, “I will miss her, too.” It would make sense to a child, however, if the teacher said, “I didn’t know your friend, but I can tell she was someone who was very important to you. I feel sad that you had to experience such a loss.”

- *Listen more, talk less.* It is fine to share personal feelings and express caring and concern, but it should be kept brief. Keep the focus on the children who are grieving and give them plenty of space and time to talk.
- *Avoid trying to “cheer up” students or their families.* Remember, a teacher’s goal is not to take away the pain of this grief. Powerful and painful feelings will be with the survivors for some time. Comments and efforts meant to cheer people up or find something positive in the situation usually are not helpful.
- *Allow emotional expression.* Young people going through grief are often told to “be strong,” “toughen up,” or cover up their feelings. A more helpful intervention is to suggest they are probably having many strong feelings and invite them to talk about them. Expressing emotions is an important part of grieving. This may mean watching someone be angry, selfish, or grief struck.
- *Demonstrate empathy.* Teachers should reflect back what they see students express, directly or indirectly. It should be done with compassion and without judgment.
- *Stop harmful reactions when safety is a concern.* Some children react to grief with angry outbursts. Expressions such as these are natural and show that children are willing to experience some of the truly deep feelings that accompany

profound grief. Allow grieving children to cry, shout, kick the floor, or throw down a book. If such behavior poses a risk to the grieving child or others, however, it should be stopped. Property damage is also not necessary to this process, and is not helpful to children.

When children do not have an opportunity to experience and talk about their grief, they often find it difficult to make sense of their experience and move on. Inquiries from teachers or other school staff can be immensely important in these circumstances. The following story offers a compelling example.

Can Someone Just Be Honest?

Seventeen-year-old James worked after school at a local restaurant. One afternoon, he received a call from a relative with the terrible news that his older brother had just died in an accident. His parents were on their way to meet with the police. An aunt and uncle would be by to pick up James and take him home where he could be with his younger brothers and sisters.

When the aunt and uncle arrived, they were under the impression that James did not know about his brother's death. They smiled and made small talk and acted as if nothing was out of the ordinary. Back at the family home, they gathered the children around the television to watch a movie. They chose a comedy. James could not figure out what he was supposed to do. Was he supposed to pretend he was happy? Laugh? Act as if he did not know about his brother's death? Should he tell his younger siblings what had happened? "Can someone just be honest?" he kept asking himself.

By the time his parents returned home and told all of the children about the death, a good 4 hours after he had first learned about it, James was completely confused about his feelings and responses. In the weeks and months that followed, he talked little about his brother's death. He rarely showed emotion about it. He kept on with work and school. He focused on graduating from high school and following through on his longstanding plans to join the Navy.

These were difficult times for his parents. His mother struggled with powerful grief, and for several weeks she was unable to return to work. She found it difficult to do her usual family tasks—shop for food, prepare meals, get the younger children ready for school. James stepped up and took on more of these responsibilities. Everyone was impressed with how well he was coping and the maturity he showed in helping his family.

After a few months, as his mother's acute grief started to improve, James began having more problems with his brother's death. He experienced outbursts of anger or crying. He had troubling dreams. He felt empty at times and hopeless about the future. He missed his brother more deeply, and the feelings seemed to be getting worse rather than better.

After several months, his mother brought James to talk with a bereavement counselor. At first, he could not explain why he was having these increasing problems. As he told his story, however, he realized that he had never really had a chance to experience and express the terrible grief he felt about

his brother's death. He had felt a need to keep things together for himself and his family while his mother was struggling so much with her own feelings. There never seemed to be anyone for him to talk to. As she improved, his own feelings and reactions became stronger, to the point where he now felt distracted and disturbed by them.

James needed to have a place to talk about his own story—how he learned about his brother's death, how he felt about it, what this emptiness would mean in his life. His grief, however, once it emerged, was not unusual or complicated. In fact, after just a couple of meetings, he felt more settled, clearer about how he was experiencing this loss, and hopeful again about the future. He did not feel a need for further meetings. This was a simple intervention that a teacher or school counselor could have offered as well. James went on to graduate and pursue his career in the military.

What *Not* to Say

The following are some examples of well-intentioned statements that are not helpful to grieving children or their families.

- **“I know exactly what you are going through.”** It is not possible to know what another individual is going through, especially in a matter as profound as the loss of a loved one. Even if you have lost family members, close friends, or a spouse, your own experience is as distinct as the children you teach.

What to say instead:

- “I can only imagine how difficult this must be for you.”
- “I wonder what this is like for you.”
- **“You must be incredibly angry.”** Anger is a natural reaction in the grief process, but it is impossible to know what someone is experiencing at any given time. Telling people what they ought to be feeling is not helpful.

What to say instead:

- “I wonder what kind of feelings you’re having about this.”
- “Most people have strong feelings when something like this happens in their lives. Has that been true for you?”
- “What have the last few days been like for you?”
- **“I know this must be difficult, but it’s important to remember the good things in life as well.”** Watching someone grieve is difficult. The desire to cheer up children or their families is understandable, but it is not helpful. What grieving families need is permission to fully experience and express their immeasurable grief or

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anger, confusion, relief, or whatever other feelings they are having. Attempts to cheer up those who are grieving may quiet their expressions of grief, but they do not lift the powerful feelings or help them process their loss.

- **“Both of my parents died when I was your age.”** Avoid statements that compete with children’s experiences of loss. Children who had one parent or a sibling die may feel their loss is not as meaningful if the focus is shifted to someone who has suffered even more. Similarly, comments about another student who lost both parents last year may make children feel their situation is not as significant.
- **“You’ll need to be strong now for your family. It’s important to get a grip on your feelings.”** The most important opportunity we can offer grieving children and their families is that of expressing their thoughts and feelings fully. Grieving children are often told they should not be expressive—that they need to grow up fast, keep it together for their family, manage their feelings, and not feel sorry for themselves. These messages tend to hold children back from experiencing the deep and powerful feelings they are having without helping them cope or adjust any more effectively.
- **“My 15-year-old dog died last week. I feel very sad, too.”** It is impossible to compare losses, and generally not useful to attempt to do so. As much as possible, keep the focus on the children’s experience and need for support.

What About the Stages of Grief?

Many people are familiar with the Five Stages of Grief developed about 40 years ago by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross¹ or with other models that describe the stages people move through in the grief process. These include stages such as denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Although these models may help us understand something about the range of experiences people have in relationship to grief, they do not by themselves accurately predict the sequence of reactions most people go through most of the time. In fact, people, including most children, experience many of these kinds of feelings at different times throughout grief. Grief is not a simple linear process. Rather than try to apply children’s experiences to any specific model about grief, it is more useful to take steps to understand what an individual child is experiencing at the present time and tailor support to the child’s specific needs.