

## Supporting Grieving Students in Schools

“By opening communication about loss and grief issues, educators can build a bridge between the world of fear, isolation and loneliness to the world of truth, compassion and dignity for the grieving child” -Linda Goldman, 2000

Living with the dying and death of a family member often brings the most intense and difficult emotions that young people have ever felt. Not only are these thoughts and feelings difficult to understand, but young people often lack the emotional vocabulary to describe what they're going through. This can leave them feeling extremely alone, struggling to regulate their emotions, unsure about what feelings and thoughts are acceptable to express, how to express them and with whom. Outbursts triggered by seemingly unrelated or insignificant incidents, or the onset of new behaviours like impulsivity or hyperactivity, can be seen as a result of this struggle.

Children and teenagers spend a considerable amount of their time at school and may look to teachers, school counsellors and other school personnel for emotional support and direction in times of difficulty. The ability of school personnel to respond quickly and provide appropriate support to distressed students is a key protective factor that helps to build resilience in children. Educators may be uniquely positioned to recognize and respond to the needs of grieving students, creating supportive environments where young people can continue to thrive and learn. This resource compiles some of the common issues that grieving children and teenagers face and some helpful strategies to address them.

### Emotional and behavioural changes

- **Intense emotions:** Students may react to various situations more intensely than before, may act out, have strong mood swings, and are often caught off guard by their own emotions.

*How you can help:* Many young people find it helpful to know that there is a safe place, or a person they can seek out when they have these strong feelings. They may need to talk about what they are experiencing and have their feelings validated and know they will have support to get through this. You can assist them to identify where they can go, like the library or main office, and who they can talk to, such as the principal or vice-principal, social worker, guidance counsellor, etc. Some students find it helpful to have a special signal to let the teacher know what's happening, without having to explain in the moment - teachers and students can work together to agree on a plan that feels safe for everyone.



- Behavioral changes:** Younger children may seek extra affection and comfort from others, may adopt self-soothing behaviours such as thumb-sucking, or may seek attention, etc. Older children and teens may act out or become withdrawn. Although some of these behaviours may seem inappropriate, they typically serve a purpose, such as a need for attention, emotional expression, comfort or control. As a result, focusing solely on eliminating the behaviour can worsen the very need it seeks to address.

*How you can help:* If you can identify the underlying need, you may be able to help students find alternatives that are not disruptive or harmful. For example, a child who seems to be seeking attention may benefit from a few minutes of supportive one-on-one time with the teacher a few times a week. You can talk with the student about the behaviour you're concerned about, and work with them to come up with a plan to help them curb their behaviour and have their needs met, without them feeling ashamed or 'in trouble'. As well, if you maintain limits, expectations, consistent routines and participation in familiar activities as much as possible, you can foster a sense of predictability and comfort which helps kids cope.
- Grieving over time:** The way that a child experiences and interacts with the world is fundamentally changed forever by the illness and death of a loved one. Learning to live with this 'new normal' can be a lifelong process. Sometimes feelings of grief recur years after a death, as children understand the death with a different developmental perspective. Holidays or special occasions can be especially difficult.

*How you can help:* By acknowledging that grief is an ongoing process, educators can help children understand that they are not regressing or failing to cope; rather, they are still learning how to live in this new and continually changing world.

## Communicating information with others

- Balancing "separate lives":** Many grieving kids say they feel like they are living two separate lives - one at home where dying and grieving have a strong presence, and the other at school where everything else seems to continue as usual. Some young people struggle with this contrast, while others look forward to the sanctuary of school where things feel more "normal."

*How you can help:* If you are able to speak discreetly with the student, let them know you are aware of the situation and that their privacy will be respected. You can also ask them if there are other students who know what they are going through, and whether, or what they want others to know. Even if a student wants to keep their experience private, they may find it helpful to have one classmate who knows, and who they can trust to respect their privacy. You may be able to help the student identify a trustworthy peer, or help them decide what to say to that person.
- When students DO want others to know:** Some students prefer to have a group discussion with the class, sharing information all at once rather than answering their peers' questions one-on-one.

*How you can help:* Having you there to lead or support the student during a class discussion can alleviate a great deal of the burden. Using clear, concrete and age-appropriate language, this dialogue may focus on illness, dying or what grief feels like, and how students can help and support one another. Some students would prefer to be involved in the discussion, while others would rather sit with their peers or even be out of the room until it is finished.
- When students do NOT want others to know:** Young people may have a variety of reasons to be reluctant to have others know what they're going through. Some may not know how to tell their peers, while others fear being treated differently, or may simply want to keep their experience private.

**How you can help:** You can start by asking what the student is afraid would happen if others did know. You may be able to dispel some fears or to help them find a way to say what they want others to know. If not, you can reassure them that you will respect their privacy, let them know that you are available for them to talk to, and try to check in with them periodically.



## Academic performance

- It is common for a student's academic performance to change when they are grieving, both before and after a death. Some young people focus their attention on school, in some cases resulting in improved grades. For others, their focus is pulled towards the issues at home, making it very difficult to concentrate at school where they may feel distracted, easily frustrated and overwhelmed.

**How you can help:** If you are concerned, you could meet privately with the student to let them know you'd like to try to help them at school during this difficult time. Suggest a couple of options and ask the student if they would feel comfortable trying any or all of them. Some examples of reasonable accommodations may include:

- offering assistance with homework or arranging study buddies;
- designing plans and modifying expectations for assignments and tests (e.g. allowing extensions, substituting oral reports for written);
- modifying schedule or adding a resource period.

Some young people may worry that your perception that they need help at all indicates a failure on their part, and need your reassurance that that is not the case. Let them know it is common for academics to be affected during grieving and that many young people experience the same thing.

## Special Occasions

- Days like birthdays, holidays, Mother's Day or Father's Day can be especially challenging. Some children may want to think about the person who died, while others do not.

**How you can help:** For upcoming events that will be discussed in class, such as Mother's Day or Father's day, you can talk with your student in advance to let them know what to expect, and to find out whether and how they would like to participate. Some young people prefer to make something for the person who died, while others may choose to participate in the activity with someone else in mind. For other special or difficult days like birthdays, you may be able to create a calendar with the student so that you both know when to expect them, and to discuss whether there is something that would be helpful for the student to do or to have with them on those days.

Children and youth living through the dying and death of a loved one face many challenges, in the short term and through their developmental evolution. As teachers, support staff and school administrators, your provision of caring presence, sensitive understanding and stable support can make a significant difference in a child's grief - the impact of which may endure a lifetime.

## Print and Web Resources

For more information about supporting grieving children, to find out about our programs or to access additional written resources, please visit our website:

[www.mountsinai.on.ca/temmy\\_latner/patients/childrens\\_grief](http://www.mountsinai.on.ca/temmy_latner/patients/childrens_grief)

The following websites have information about supporting grieving children in schools:

[www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk) - click the "Schools/Professionals" tab)

[www.scholastic.com/childrenandgrief/](http://www.scholastic.com/childrenandgrief/) - a range of resources for supporting grieving children

[www.scholastic.com/livestrong/pdfs/QandA.PDF](http://www.scholastic.com/livestrong/pdfs/QandA.PDF) - specifically for teachers

<http://loyola.hcdsb.org/> - click the "Parent Resources" tab and choose "Grieving Adolescents" for a list of resources, including suggested guidelines for teachers

The following print resources address children's grief in the school system:

Hospice Calgary. *Good Grief. Supporting the Bereaved Student: A Resource Guide for Educators.*

Goldman, L. (1998). "Helping the grieving child in school," *Healing Magazine* 5: 8-16.

Klicker, R. L. (2000). *A Student Dies, A School Mourns: Dealing with Death and Loss in the School Community.*

Saunders, L. (2007). *What We Don't Discuss: A Teacher's Guide to Death and Dying.*

The Dougy Centre (2004). *Helping the Grieving Student: A Guide for Teachers.*

The Dougy Centre (2003). *When Death Impacts Your School: A Guide for School Administrators.*

The Max and Beatrice Wolfe Children's Centre and the Dr Jay Children's Grief Program at the Temmy Latner Centre for Palliative Care offers education, counselling support, and medical care in the community and at the Centre to children and families where a child is dying grieving the dying or death of a family member. We also provide consultation and education for healthcare professionals, children's mental health providers and boards of education.

You can find more information on how to support children and youth through grief in *Living Dying: A Guide for Adults Supporting Grieving Children*, a book produced by our Centre. The book is for adults who know young people, who will experience, or have experienced, the dying and death of a loved one. To order your copy of *Living Dying* e-mail [max&bea@tlcpc.org](mailto:max&bea@tlcpc.org) or call 416-586-4800 ext. 6664.

In order to provide this free service to grieving families, we rely entirely on donors like you. To help us continue to support families in need, here are ways you can donate (be sure to direct your donation to the Max and Beatrice Wolfe Children's Centre) :

- Visit [www.tlcpc.org](http://www.tlcpc.org)
- Call 416-586-8203 ext. 3936
- Use a credit card for a monthly or one-time gift
- Send a cheque to the Mount Sinai Hospital Foundation of Toronto at 1001-522 University Avenue, Toronto Ontario M5G 1W7