

Grief in the Classroom

taken from

The Compassionate Friends of Canada, Inc.

(An International Self-Help Organization for Bereaved Parents and Their Surviving Children)

Dealing with Grieving Students

The school classroom is often a child's second 'family'.

As a teacher, you have the opportunity to touch children's lives in a very special way. When a death influences the lives of your students, you, along with your school, can make a life-long difference by creating an environment for healing and support.

Talk with bereaved students and their parents before they return to school.

If possible, call or meet with families, as this lets them know you are thinking of them and that the school is supportive. Ask what they would like the class to know about the death, funeral arrangements, etc. This is an important step in stalling the 'rumour mill.' That can be harmful and extremely frustrating for families.

Talk to your class about grief and encourage them to share how they feel.

Discuss what types of loss or death, the students in your class have experienced, and how they coped. School counsellors and social workers, who can do a presentation or aid in discussion, are valuable assets for bereaved students.

Discuss how difficult it may be for their classmate to return to school, and how they may be of help.

Ask your class how they would like to be treated if they were returning to school after death, pointing out differences in preferences. Some students prefer to be left alone; others want the death to be discussed freely. Most grieving students want everyone to treat them the same way as before. As a rule, they don't like people being extra nice, putting them in the spotlight or acting like nothing happened.

Visit a funeral home or attend the funeral, and sign the guest book so that the student will know you were there.

Provide a way for your class to reach out to a grieving student and his/her family.

Sending cards or pictures to the child and family shows that the class is thinking of them. If students knew the person who died, they could share memories of that person.

Provide flexibility and support to grieving students upon their return to class.

Recognize that students may have difficulty focusing on school work. Be open to making allowances if quiet, alone time or assignment extensions are required. However, it is also important to maintain the usual routines and limits for behaviour and academics, as this provides a safe, secure and comforting environment.

Provide assistance to grieving students who are floundering academically. Help to around for a tutor if you are not able to provide the time yourself. Be prepared to let students talk, not only about academic problems but also about their feelings concerning the death.

Inform students that school counsellors or social workers are available. It is important that students have someone who is willing to listen. If you are a counsellor or social worker, be knowledgeable about available resources in the community and inform students and parents.

The school community as a whole should acknowledge the grief of all students and staff. This may be done by holding a memorial assembly, building a memorial wall, having a balloon release, planting a tree, installing a bench, or creating a memorial garden, to name a few. It is important to support students if a death occurs outside the school year as well. If a school ceremony is not possible at this time, some form of acknowledgement is recommended when students return to class.