

Research

How teachers and counselors can reach out to bereaved students

When Children Grieve

By Susan Black

Robert, a 14-year-old whose mother died of cancer a few years ago, says at first he was numb with grief, then depressed. “I felt that a piece of me was missing,” he told his school counselor.

The depression faded, but Robert’s loneliness persisted. To fill the emptiness, he wrote poetry and tried to hold onto “a very distant memory” of his mother. In an interview with researchers at New York’s Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, Robert remembers that it was helpful to “get back into the normal groove of things.” He also recalls that “it took a couple of weeks” for his deepest grief to emerge.

But for Aidan, a 6-year-old boy whose father died in the collapse of the World Trade Center, grief took a different trajectory. The child despaired, alternating between tears and tantrums and constantly asking for proof that his daddy, a Brooklyn firefighter, had died in the rubble.

Despite his kindergarten teacher’s disapproval, Aidan repeatedly re-created the Twin Towers with blocks, wondering aloud if he could have saved his dad if he had been with him. At times he imagined his dad looking down and talking to him. His anger welled up when he figured that his father was one of 343 uniformed firefighters, out of some 10,000, who died in the tragedy.

“I feel so mad and upset this happened and that’s all I know and that’s the end,” is

the way Aidan expresses his unrelenting grief.

Everything changes

Death, as the saying goes, is certain. And so is the fact that many kids in your school will come face-to-face with the death of a close relative or friend.

The U.S. Bureau of Census estimates that more than 2 million children and adolescents under 18 have experienced the death of a parent. In 2000, 4 percent of single parents were widowed, and about 14 percent of their households included children under 12. Figure in the deaths of other close relatives and friends, and many more children are affected by grief.

Schools need to reach out to grieving students, but they also need to remember that grief knows no boundaries. Sometimes it spills over to teachers and other school staff members who, like their students, need guidance to handle their own shock and suffering.

“My first year of teaching was a total trauma,” a middle school English teacher remembers. “First, a seventh-grader’s dad was crushed by a falling steel beam at work. On Thanksgiving Day, a girl’s mother died from choking during their family’s holiday dinner. In early spring, a girl walked home with her two younger sisters, both in elementary school, and found their mother hanging from a rope tied to a chandelier in the entryway.”

The teacher talked with her principal about what to say and do when the bereaved children returned to her class, but he simply advised her to “keep things normal and be kind.”

She’s still haunted by the grieving children, recalling their hollow eyes and empty expressions when they returned to



school. "I let those kids down," she says. "I went on as though nothing had changed. But, in truth, for these children everything had changed."

The school's role

Schools cannot compensate for children's severe losses, and teachers and counselors cannot assuage children's grief alone. But schools should be prepared to help bereaved students work through their grief.

That's the message that Helene McLaughlin, a school counselor in Edgecombe, Maine, gives in an article written for Portland's Center for Grieving Children. She recommends these steps:

1. Create a support team that deals with grieving children; meet at least four times a year to review bereavement research and methods of supporting children at various ages.

2. Communicate to all school staff that children's grief is a "natural, normal, and healthy response" to death, and that grieving children need emotional support at school as well as at home.

3. Consider each grieving child as an individual case, taking into account the child's age, experiences with death, and home life.

4. Teach staff how to answer grieving children's questions and how to talk about their thoughts and feelings.

5. Ask teachers to watch for grieving students who are disoriented, confused, forgetful, impatient, sad, inattentive, and disruptive, as well as those whose grief resurfaces months after a death.

6. Help students resume their regular schedules and studies; provide counseling for children who struggle with "the deep and exhausting inner work of grief."

"I constantly remind teachers and other staff to refer troubled kids to our counselors," said the principal of a school I visited recently. "Teachers are expected to reach out to grieving children, but they are prohibited by policy from acting as counselors or therapists."

The Dougy Center for Grieving Children & Families, based in Portland, Ore., offers advice to school leaders based on its work with more than 14,000 bereaved children and teens. In *When Death Im-*

pacts Your School, the center encourages administrators and teachers to talk with bereaved students and their families *before* the students return to school. One topic that should be discussed is how much information a grieving child wants teachers to share with other students.

It's also important to know what *not* to do. For instance, the Dougy Center advises school officials to inform their staffs that it is unacceptable to:

- Suggest that a student has been sad and has grieved long enough;

- Tell a student it's time to move on;

- Act as if nothing has happened;

- Make comments such as: It could be worse; you were lucky it didn't happen to you; I know how you feel; you'll be stronger for this;

- Expect students to go through a short grieving process and completely recover; or

- Punish students for being forgetful, preoccupied, and unprepared for class.

How children grieve

Children who grieve over the death of a parent, grandparent, brother or sister, or friend often are "the forgotten mourners," says Susan Smith, author of a book by that name. Smith and other researchers on childhood and adolescent bereavement say most adults mistakenly assume that kids bounce back after a short mourning period. And they incorrectly believe that kids' grief steadily diminishes until it ends for good.

But grief often submerges and re-emerges, in varying intensity, for months and years. How children and teens understand death—and how they grieve—depends on factors such as age and developmental stage; ethnic culture and beliefs; and whether the death was caused by disease, accident, or suicide.

Many children experience "complicated grief" that involves serious and long-lasting physical and emotional reactions, says Columbia University's Grace Christ, who explains how children's developmental stages affect their understanding of death and the form their mourning takes:

- **3- to 5-year-olds** do not understand the permanence of death; ask repeatedly

when the deceased person is coming back; are frightened by adults' grieving; demand a replacement for the deceased. Complicated grief includes anxiety and regressive behaviors longer than six months after the death.

- **6- to 8-year-olds** understand that death is universal and permanent; assume blame and guilt for the death; mourn through stories, pictures, and remembrances. Complicated grief includes school refusal, physical symptoms, suicidal thoughts, and regressive emotions and behavior.

In their own words

Most grieving kids benefit from sharing their stories with others in small support groups, says Mary Perschy, an experienced teacher, counselor, and school administrator, who recounts her experience counseling a teen support group in Columbia, Md.

The teens offered this advice to other grieving kids:

- Join a support group. You'll realize that others have the same feelings and you won't feel so abnormal. If you can't be in a group, find a friend who will stick with you, or find a counselor or psychologist to talk with.

- Don't block out your grief or it will only get worse. I write in my journal and then go back and read my entries to see how far I have come.

- Listen to music. It helps to not feel so alone.

- Cry alone if you don't want to cry in front of anyone.

- Don't be afraid to use the word death or the name of the one who died. Let your friends and teachers know that it hurts more if they avoid talking about the death.

- Tell your teachers that it helps to know they care—but that you don't want to be pressured to express your grief.

- Ask teachers to talk to you first before sharing your personal information with others in your class, especially kids you hardly know.

Research

■ **9- to 11-year-olds** demand detailed information about the death; avoid sadness and other strong emotions; increasingly express anger; feel a sense of the deceased's presence. Complicated grief includes shunning friends and increased moodiness and misbehavior three to six months after the death.

■ **12- to 14-year-olds** act callous, indifferent, and egocentric; strongly sense the deceased person's presence; de-

scribe ongoing conversations with the deceased and take comfort in the deceased's clothing and possessions. Complicated grief includes refusing to attend school, persistent depression, drug or alcohol use, associating with delinquents, and precocious sexual behavior.

■ **15- to 17-year-olds** express thoughtfulness and empathy; resist excessive demands at home; feel overwhelmed by survivors' emotional dependence and grief; grieve in adultlike ways with sadness and painful memories, but grief is of shorter duration; worry about their own vulnerability and death; have private conversations with the deceased. Complicated grief includes mood swings, withdrawal from friends and group activities, poor school performance, and high-risk behaviors such as drug use.

Learn more

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Levels of grief, levels of care

Grief is compounded when the death is a suicide. Cynthia Pfeiffer, director of the Childhood Bereavement Program at Cornell University's Well Medical College, found that 6- to 12-year-olds who lost a parent or sibling to suicide experienced "significant emotional and behavioral problems, such as anxiety and depression." The children suffered intense sadness, longing for the deceased, worry about losing another relative, guilt, and concern about explaining the death-by-suicide to others.

Some symptoms take months or years to subside. Teens grieving for a friend

who committed suicide were depressed and anxious seven months after the death; for some these problems persisted for more than three years. Teens who have witnessed a suicide are vulnerable to post-traumatic stress disorder and often try to douse their grief with drugs and alcohol.

The more complicated a child's grief, says Julie Stokes of Britain's Gloucestershire Royal Hospital, the higher the level of service required. Stokes recommends a three-tiered model:

Tier 1: Support is provided by teachers, school nurses and counselors, parents, friends, church members, and others; support is based on caring and friendship, but is not therapeutic.

Tier 2: Therapeutic interventions are provided by trained staff and volunteers who have expertise in grief counseling.

Tier 3: Therapy for severely grief-impaired children is provided by highly skilled clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, and family therapists who specialize in bereavement counseling.

Parents and teachers should remember that they "cannot shield grieving children from sorrow," says Nancy McEntire, a researcher with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's Early Childhood and Parenting Collaborative. But they can guide and comfort children through their mourning and bereavement.

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Recognizing children's grief

How will adults know when a grieving child needs extra help?

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry advises parents and teachers to consider referring a child for therapeutic counseling if these grief-related symptoms persist for an extended period:

- Severe depression that results in little interest in daily activities
- Inability to eat and sleep normally

- Fear of being alone
- Imitation of the deceased
- Repeatedly wishing to join the deceased
- Loss of interest in play and friends
- Refusal to attend school
- Steady drop in school achievement.

Source: Children and Grief: Fact Sheet 8. American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, July 2004. www.aacap.org/publications/factsfam/grief.htm.

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