



SUPPORTING OUR STUDENTS

after the death of a family member or friend



COALITION *to* SUPPORT
GRIEVING STUDENTS

Grief can have a serious impact on learning and emotional and social development.

For school-age children, bereavement can lead to decreased academic performance, social withdrawal, or new behavioral problems. Schools can help minimize these difficulties and foster recovery and resiliency.

The skillful and informed response of adults to a student's grief can serve as a vital source of support and stability during a difficult time. Although this booklet is geared specifically to teachers (and the accompanying handout is written for parents), the information and the message is relevant for all adults in the school community.

We hope you will read this booklet and share these resources and what you have learned with others in your school and district.



THE DEATH OF A FAMILY MEMBER OR FRIEND

is painful for children and teens just as it is for adults.

Children may not have experienced a loss before. They may not understand what the loss or their reaction means. They may be unsure how to act or respond. Even children who have had prior losses will still be deeply affected. This handout offers advice to educators and other school personnel about how to support students who are grieving and how their classmates can help.



For more information, the New York Life Foundation offers a free booklet:

After a loved one dies — How children grieve and how parents and other adults can support them.

You can download a PDF or order hard copies in either English or Spanish at no charge at www.achildgrief.com.

CHILDREN MAY FIND IT SAFER TO TALK TO YOU AT FIRST.

It is upsetting to see children struggle with loss. Children may ask difficult questions, such as: How could something this unfair happen? What's going to become of my family? Adults often ask such questions as well, even when they don't expect an answer. We don't need to have all the answers for children. We can help most by simply being present with and attentive to children as they ask questions and express their feelings. Children may be reluctant to talk with their parents/caregivers about their own grief when they are worried about how their parents/caregivers are adjusting. Teachers and other school personnel often have some distance from the loss, especially when it is a family member who has died. Children may find it safer to talk to you at first.

Talking with children about a death is especially difficult when you're dealing with your own grief.

When the death involves a member of the school community, you may find yourself struggling with your own feelings. When many in the class are grieving, it can seem particularly challenging to provide support while you, too, are dealing with the loss. You may worry that you will upset the students if you show that you are grieving.

It's OK to show your feelings.

Children know when adults are genuine and honest. When children see that adults have strong feelings and find ways to cope, it helps them learn how to cope, too. This is an important opportunity to show children ways to understand and express their upset feelings. Sharing the experience of loss with your students helps everyone recognize, feel, and cope with the strong emotions.

You can help children understand what has happened.

When speaking with children about the death of a loved one, use the words “dead” and “died.” Other expressions, such as “everlasting sleep” or “passed away,” may confuse children and make it hard for them to understand what has happened. Be sure young children (especially preschool-age children and those in early elementary grades) understand four major concepts:

1 DEATH IS IRREVERSIBLE.

If children do not understand that death is permanent, they may not be able to start to grieve the loss. They may be angry that the person has chosen not to return.

2 ALL LIFE FUNCTIONS END COMPLETELY AT THE TIME OF DEATH.

Children who do not understand this concept may worry that someone who has died is cold, hungry, or in pain.

3 EVERYTHING THAT IS ALIVE EVENTUALLY DIES.

If children do not understand this, they may wonder what they did, or what the person who died did, that caused this particular person to die. This leads to guilt and shame.

4 THERE ARE PHYSICAL REASONS THAT SOMEONE DIES.

When children understand the true reasons for a death, they are less likely to make up explanations that cause them to feel guilty or ashamed.

Guidelines on responding to the death of a student or staff member

The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement has guidelines on how to respond to the death of a student or staff member; you can download them for free at www.schoolcrisiscenter.org (section on school resources). One set of guidelines specifically addresses situations where the death is due to suicide, and it includes model scripts for talking about suicide with children of different grade levels.

Invite older children and youth to talk.

Older children and youth may not be ready to talk when you first offer to speak with them. They may prefer time alone or talking with their friends. They may say they do not need or wish to talk, even when they are actually feeling overwhelmed. Don't try to force the conversation. Wait for them to accept your invitation. Acknowledge that this can be difficult to discuss, and let them know that children and adults often find it helpful to talk about their feelings. Help them identify other adults with whom they can speak when they are ready. This might be a guidance counselor or mental health provider in the school. Reach out to their parents/caregivers and offer to provide assistance. Remain available and supportive, and continue to offer to talk from time to time.

Adults often worry that they will upset children by bringing up the topic of death.

Remember, it is the death that upsets the children, not your questions. When you ask them how they are doing, you allow them to show you their distress — you don't cause it. Children find it difficult to grieve in isolation; they appreciate your concern and your support. Don't be afraid to ask them how they are doing. A genuine expression of sympathy is most appropriate.

The goal is not to take away the pain of grief...

...but to allow an opportunity for children to express it. Avoid comments aimed at trying to cheer up students who are grieving (such as, "At least you were able to spend Christmas with him before he died," or "At least he died a hero"). It's also common to want to share personal experiences about loss.

However, with grieving children, it's important to listen more and talk less. Give them space to express themselves.



Children often feel guilty after a death has occurred.

Children of all ages, as well as adults, often wonder what they did, didn't do, or should have done that would have prevented the death. This may happen even when there is no logical reason to feel this way. Children may also feel guilty for surviving the death of a sibling or peer. They may feel guilty if they are having fun or not feeling very sad after someone they know has died. Children are often reluctant to share their guilt feelings. Reassure children that they are not responsible for the death, even if there is no reason to suspect they feel guilty.



Children may appear selfish and immature after a personal loss.

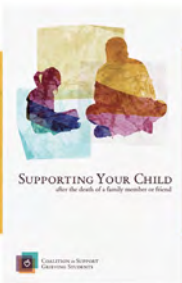
Children tend to be most concerned with things that affect them personally. As they struggle to deal with a personal loss, children may appear more self-centered and immature than usual. They may become more demanding, refuse to share, or pick fights with peers. They may say things that seem very selfish or uncaring. This selfishness is not a sign that children don't care about the person who died or the needs of others. Rather, it demonstrates that they are under stress and grieving. Show your concern and continue to provide support. Avoid criticizing them for behaviors that seem self-centered or insensitive. Once they feel their needs are being met, they will be able to think more about the needs of others.



Reach out to parents/caregivers.

After the death of a family member, parents/caregivers may feel overwhelmed and unsure how to help their children. They generally welcome advice from school personnel and appreciate your concern.

School staff may be the only professionals that speak to families early, after the death but before the funeral has occurred. Encourage parents/caregivers to invite children to participate in funerals and other memorial services. When a close friend or relative has died, children should be offered the opportunity to attend the funeral or memorial service whenever possible. When children are not allowed to take part in these important events, they often resent being excluded. They miss the support provided by friends, family, and (as appropriate) their religious services. They worry about what is so awful in the service. What is being done to their loved one that they are not permitted to see? Here are some suggestions to share with parents/caregivers about how to approach the funeral or memorial service with children:



The Coalition to Support Grieving Students has developed a handout for you to give to parents/caregivers. You can download copies at www.grievingstudents.org.

EXPLAIN IN SIMPLE TERMS WHAT WILL HAPPEN.

Where will the service take place? Who will be there? What is likely to occur? Will the casket be open? Will people be telling stories of funny or pleasant memories? Will there be a lot of crying? Invite and answer questions.

LET YOUR CHILDREN DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT TO ATTEND.

Don't force them to participate in any ritual or activity they find frightening or unpleasant. Let them know it's OK to take a break for a few minutes or leave if they are uncomfortable.

FIND AN ADULT TO BE WITH EACH CHILD.

Especially for younger children, find an adult who can stay with each child throughout the service. This person can answer questions, provide comfort, and give the child attention and support. It's best if this is someone the child knows and likes who isn't directly affected by the death, such as a babysitter, neighbor, or staff member from school. This adult can focus on the child's needs, including leaving the service if the child wishes.

OFFER A ROLE IN THE SERVICE.

Children may appreciate a simple task, such as handing out memorial cards or helping to choose flowers or a favorite song for the service. Suggest something that will comfort and not overwhelm them.

OFFER OTHER OPTIONS.

Younger children may want to play quietly in the back of the sanctuary or meeting area. This still gives them a sense of having participated. Older children and youth may want to invite a close friend to sit with them in the family section.



Provide support over time.

Children who have lost a family member or close friend generally feel that loss throughout their lives. There are things you can do to help children cope over time.

HELP CHILDREN PRESERVE AND CREATE MEMORIES.

Even though it may at first be painful to talk about the person who died, keep the person's memory alive through stories, pictures, and continued mention of the person in everyday conversation. Children often like to have physical reminders of the person who has died. They may want to carry a picture or object that reminds them of the person who died, or keep one in a special place at home.

ANTICIPATE GRIEF TRIGGERS.

Memories and feelings of grief can be triggered by anniversaries, family holidays, or other important events. They may bring up sudden and powerful feelings of sadness. Everyday events can also be reminders—a favorite song, a story, mention of the place they last went on vacation, etc. These grief triggers can catch people off guard. The Coalition to Support Grieving Students has developed a handout for you to give to parents/caregivers. You can download copies at www.grievingstudents.org.

Talk with your students about how to handle these triggers if they happen in class or elsewhere at school. Identify a place where children can go when triggers occur. They may want to talk to someone or simply to leave a discussion that brings up painful memories. Once children know they can leave, they rarely need to do so.

Provide learning supports.

Children often have difficulty concentrating or learning while they are grieving. They may benefit from tutoring, extra support, or temporary changes in their test schedules or other classroom demands. Don't wait for school problems to start before offering help. Talk to your students and their parents/caregivers and other key people at the school, such as coaches, band directors, and club sponsors. You may want to talk to the school counselor as well. Even if students don't want to speak to a counselor, the counselor can act as a resource for advice about how to improve things at school or where to find additional services in the school or community. Reach out to other teachers and school personnel who interact with the students, and speak to the teachers who will be working with the students next year to help provide a smoother transition.

Grieving can last a lifetime but should not consume a life.

Children never “get over” a major loss such as the death of a close family member or friend. Children grieve in stages and over many years. At each new stage in their lives, such as when they graduate from school, get married, have their own children, or reach the age when a parent died, they will have new skills in thinking and relating to others. They will use these skills to reach a more satisfying explanation of this death and a better appreciation of the impact it has had on them and those they care about. In many ways, the work of making meaning from a death never ends. But, over time, this work becomes less difficult and takes less energy. It may start as a full-time job. Later, it becomes more of a part-time effort that allows other meaningful work and experiences to occur. With this, satisfaction and joy become a larger part of children's lives.

For more information on this topic, you may wish to refer to: David J. Schonfeld and Marcia Quackenbush, *The Grieving Student: A Teacher's Guide* (Baltimore: Brookes Publishing, 2010).

You can locate bereavement resources in your state and community at www.achildgrief.com.

The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement has free resources. Additional materials for supporting grieving children in schools can be found at www.schoolcrisiscenter.org.

About the Coalition

The Coalition to Support Grieving Students is a unique collaboration of the leading professional organizations representing classroom educators, principals, administrators, student support personnel, and other school professionals that share a common conviction: grieving students need and deserve support and care in their schools. The Coalition develops educational materials and tools that can help all members of the school community be better prepared to help our students at a time when their need is especially great after the death of a family member or friend.

The Coalition was convened by the New York Life Foundation, a pioneering advocate for the cause of childhood bereavement, and the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, led by pediatrician and childhood bereavement expert David J. Schonfeld, MD.

Lead Founding Members



Founding Members



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These guidelines are designed to help school administrators, teachers, and crisis team members respond to the needs of students and staff after a loss has impacted the school environment, such as after the death of a student or staff member or when deaths occur that affect many people in the community. These guidelines are not intended to provide guidance on clinical care or bereavement counseling and are not intended to address personal losses that impact only one or a few members of the school community.

BEREAVEMENT IS COMMON AMONG SCHOOL CHILDREN

For school personnel, this means that it is highly likely you will encounter a grieving student almost every day, even if you do not see any outward or visible signs of grief. In some communities, violent deaths may be sadly common – although students in these high-risk communities may appear to be “used to loss,” they are likely to have more difficulty adjusting to multiple losses.

Well informed teachers and school personnel can be a source of support for students, but unintentionally they may, if not well informed, be a source of stress. For example, not understanding reactions may lead to misinterpretation of behavioral reactions to loss as misbehavior and disrespect for others.

How long it may take for students to adjust to the loss will vary, but most children are not “over a loss” in six months or a year. As such, appropriate services should be planned for the immediate aftermath, the months following the loss, and for the long-term.

SCHOOL CRISIS TEAM INTERVENTIONS: Responding to a Student or Staff Death in a School Setting

When a death occurs, activate the school’s crisis team and plan to address the loss. Coordinate efforts with other schools that may also be impacted.

1. First, it is extremely important to verify the information (e.g., from family members or local authorities).
2. Next, determine what information the family would like to have disclosed (or what information has already been released publicly from a reliable source).
3. Once the death has been verified, notify the school staff and students.



By the time children complete high school, most will experience the death of a family member or friend, with 5% of children experiencing the death of a parent by 16 years of age.

Nearly 40% will experience a death of a peer
20% will have witnessed a death

Schools can be the best setting to provide services to students (and staff) after a loss that affects the school community:

1. Schools provide a familiar environment
2. Large numbers of students can be served
3. Many children will benefit from supportive services that can be readily provided in a school setting
4. Students coping after the loss can be monitored over time and referrals for clinical services can be facilitated as needed
5. Parents may be more willing to accept services provided in school settings, where the stigma associated with mental health services may be decreased



NOTIFICATION

1. Notify the School Crisis Team and Develop a Plan:

Consider activating the school crisis team. If initial notification occurs outside of school hours, this may require initiating the phone tree to notify the school staff and to invite them to meet before school to organize a unified plan and to brief school staff. If notification occurs during school hours, this may require the distribution of a written statement or a staff meeting.

2. Notify Teachers and Staff First:

Meet before school with school teachers and staff to discuss what is known about the death. This gives teachers an opportunity to ask any questions they wish and to prepare themselves before they see their students in class. If a teacher does not feel able to talk to his/her students about the death, a member of the crisis team should be available to step in or assist with the notification.

3. Notify Students Face-to-Face with Familiar Staff:

If a teacher has died, consider having a teacher from the same or a lower grade who is familiar with the deceased teacher's students, or a teacher from the school crisis team who is more comfortable, notify that class. Consider having this teacher remain with the class over the next couple days and have a substitute cover for the less directly impacted class.

4. Prepare a Statement for Students:

Adults often struggle with what to say. With a prepared statement, teachers can give the same information to all students simultaneously. This should be done in small, naturally occurring groups such as homeroom or first period classes; every effort should be made to ensure that all students are present at the time this information is shared. Include information about the availability of mental health and support services and how students may access those services. Avoid use of public address systems or large assemblies to make such announcements.

5. Prepare a Statement for Parents:

Draft a letter to be sent home with students for parents to notify them about the death and what services are being offered to students and families. Assure parents that crisis teams have been mobilized and support services are available. [\(Template letters, that schools can have in advance of a crisis so that notification statements can be quickly and easily prepared, are available at the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement.\)](#)

CRISIS AND GRIEF COUNSELING AND OTHER SUPPORT SERVICES AT SCHOOL

1. Help Students with Coping Behaviors to Support and Maintain their Attendance and Classroom Learning:

Following a loss, addressing the event with students directly may decrease the negative impact on school attendance and learning. This can be done individually and in group settings. Students may express many different emotions and feelings. The goal is to allow this expression in a safe and non-judgmental environment.

2. Help Students Deal with Difficult Feelings:

Students may also have feelings of regret, particularly if they believe they had mistreated the individual in the past. Adolescents may be particularly vulnerable as a group with an increased risk of feeling depressed or anxious and engaging in self-blame or guilt related to the loss. If the death was a suicide (see Special Circumstances below), these feelings may be heightened.

3. Help Younger Students:

Younger students may have more difficulty understanding death and are more likely to have literal misinterpretations in response to explanations (e.g., if told the deceased is in everlasting sleep, they may become fearful at bedtime). All students (and staff) are likely to experience some guilt feelings after a death, even if there is no logical reason.





CRISIS AND GRIEF COUNSELING AND OTHER SUPPORT SERVICES AT SCHOOL (Cont'd)

4. **Establish Crisis Counseling or Grief Counseling Support Rooms and Protocols:**
 1. Establish procedures for leaving class (e.g., Will a pass be required? Should a student who is very distressed be escorted to the support room?) and for returning to class before the end of the period. If a student remains in the support room at the end of the period, be sure notice is provided to the classroom teacher for that period as well as the next one. Such actions ensure that the school has accurate knowledge about student whereabouts. In the immediate aftermath of a death, limit off-grounds privileges if indicated and establish procedures to clear students prior to leaving school grounds during the school day.
 2. More extensive services will be needed in the immediate aftermath of a school-wide crisis. Consider having support and counseling services available to students and school personnel before, during and after school hours in the immediate aftermath.
 3. Plan for ongoing and long-term services to be available to students. If the death was due to a school crisis, plans should be made for commemoration and memorialization, especially at the time of the anniversary of the death(s) ([Further guidelines on memorialization and commemoration](#)). Additional services should also be planned for dates and events may serve as triggers for grief of students or staff, such as graduation, the prom, athletic events (if the deceased was an athlete) etc.
 4. Have substitute teachers available that can rotate among classes to allow teachers to seek supportive services in teacher/staff support rooms during school hours.
 5. If the death(s) are associated with a crisis that has impacted the community, consider some support services for parents at school in the immediate aftermath.
 6. School counselors, school nurses, school psychologists and school social workers can help teachers identify risk factors and signs of distress that may indicate the need for mental health services above what is offered at school. As with any counseling services, parents should be notified if additional services are recommended.
 7. Especially after traumatic losses (e.g., suicide or homicide), be proactive and set the tone for students to seek out counselors if they have troubling thoughts. Encourage students to identify friends they may be concerned about. These include students who have suicidal thoughts or have made threatening statements.

CRISIS AND GRIEF COUNSELING AND OTHER SUPPORT SERVICES AT SCHOOL (Cont'd)

5. Guidelines for Identifying Students Who May be at Higher Risk for Emotional Distress:

1. Students who were close friends of the deceased
2. Students who shared a class with the deceased. Have a member of the crisis team follow the student's schedule to help determine classmates that may benefit from extra attention.
3. Students who shared extracurricular activities with the deceased
4. Students who shared a similar characteristic with the deceased. This will depend on the circumstances of the death (e.g., chronic illness – other students with chronic illness; suicide after bullying – students who may be bullied or who had pre-existing depression; car accident – students that have recently received their driving licenses; or pedestrian accident – students who walk to school).
5. Students with a troubled or strained relationship with the deceased
6. Students from other schools if the deceased recently transferred or has siblings at another school
7. Students with a history of prior or concurrent losses and/or emotional difficulties.

6. Funerals, Memorial Services and Spontaneous Memorials

1. Participation of Students:

Students may wish to attend the memorial services and/or funeral of the deceased student or teacher. Talk to the family of the deceased and determine their wishes. If many students or staff are likely to attend, inquire if there may be visitation hours/memorial service outside of school hours. If the services are during school hours, establish a policy for student absence that allows students who have a close relationship to the deceased to attend. Have substitute teachers available for teachers who wish to attend the services. Consider arranging for crisis counseling staff to attend after-hours services that are likely to be attended by large numbers of students.

2. Spontaneous Memorials:

Informal memorials are likely to “spring up” after the death of a student or teacher. Plans to handle the flowers, cards, etc. should be made in advance. Determine the time period that the memorial will remain (one week, two weeks, a month?), and communicate to students that the memorial will be removed after that time and indicate what will be done with the non-perishable items (e.g., stuffed animals will be sent to the children's ward of local hospitals, etc.). Providing alternate commemorative opportunities for the students and engaging students early on in the response efforts or an announcement about the family's wishes may help to minimize these spontaneous memorials.





CRISIS AND GRIEF COUNSELING AND OTHER SUPPORT SERVICES AT SCHOOL (Cont'd)

6. Funerals, Memorial Services and Spontaneous Memorials (Cont'd)

3. Timing of Memorial Activities at School:

Commemorative activities and memorialization efforts should not be a focus of the crisis response in the immediate aftermath of a death. If done too soon, there may be a perception that the school is trying to “close the chapter” on grieving.

4. Equitable Policies:

In general, schools should avoid formal commemorative or memorialization activities or acts (e.g., naming a building or hanging a plaque) to mark the death of a popular student or staff member since failure to respond in the future in a similar manner to the death of a less popular student/staff may raise equity concerns; schools may be reluctant to provide similar responses after certain deaths (e.g., suicide, drug overdose) in order to minimize glamorization of the cause of death (see Special Circumstances below). Instead, less formal but thoughtful commemorative activities developed over time with active student involvement is often much more meaningful (and therapeutic) to students and staff. Such commemoration is more likely to recognize and preserve essential memories of the deceased than are more routine and reactive efforts instituted shortly after notification. ([Further information about developing appropriate commemorative and memorialization activities in schools](#))

5. Constructive Expression of Grief:

Students may wish to write letters/draw pictures to send to the deceased student's or staff member's family. Be sure these are reviewed before sending them out. Also, be careful not to interpret the drawings and writings without adequate input from mental health professionals. Avoid activities that solicit public anonymous statements, such as posting places for students to express their thoughts anonymously about the deceased, as school teachers and staff will not be able to identify students who may express worrisome thoughts (e.g., suicidal ideation or threatening statements).

6. Handling Traumatic Reminders for Students:

School desks and lockers may serve as unwelcome reminders of the deceased student(s). Consider procedures for handling these, drawing on the input of the classmates.

7. Personal Effects of the Deceased:

Arrange with parents/family members for the return of belongings that is at a time convenient for them, preferably after school hours. Have the personal effects available at the office so that parents/families are not presented with the emotional challenge of having to clean out a locker or desk. Have a member of the crisis team or a school counselor present when parents come to retrieve a child's belongs.





IMPACT ON LEARNING

Reactions after a loss can have a significant impact on learning. Students may

1. Show a decline in school performance
2. Have difficulty mastering new material
3. Become more irritable
4. Become more withdrawn
5. Become more anxious or depressed
6. Become more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors such as substance abuse, promiscuity, reckless driving, and suicide attempts in adolescents
7. Become focused on the loss

Students should be offered additional supports, such as tutoring or participation in mentoring programs to assist them in maintaining their academic progress before academic failure occurs, which would represent an additional stressor.

What Teachers Can Do:

1. Listen – to what students want to share with you. It may be difficult but just listening can be a powerful healing force.
2. Protect – students from becoming re-traumatized. Sometimes other students may ridicule or bully students who are highly emotional or cry.
3. Connect – with students who have suffered a loss by asking how they are doing; checking in with them on a regular basis; letting them know that you are available to listen; or giving them positive feedback about their attendance or classroom work.
4. Model – adult behavior that shows them how responsible adults react to loss and respond to a crisis. Adults may grieve, but they continue to act with consideration and maintain calm routines at school.
5. Teach – Crisis counselors can teach students about the normal signs and symptoms of grief and/or trauma so that students can assess and understand their own behavior and learn new ways of coping.

COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH

1. The Role of the PIO:

Media attention is likely after a death of a student or school staff. This is best handled by the Public Information Officer (PIO) of the district or the principal at the school site. Teachers, staff, and parents should be made aware that all media requests should be referred to this individual.

2. Protect Students from Being Re-Traumatized:

The focus of all communications, including media coverage, should be on the protection of students and the school environment from unwanted intrusive attention. Television coverage of the event should not be watched in the classroom during school hours. Information about how to handle media requests can be distributed to parents.

3. Ongoing communication between parents and school teachers and staff about how students are doing will be more important to ensure appropriate support and intervention services in the immediate aftermath of a death and in the long-term. Parents of children identified as at-risk for mental health difficulties should be given information about whom to contact with concerns and about positive progress. School personnel should also keep parents informed about their children's functioning at school (e.g., school work, peer relationships, and behaviors). Again, parents should be provided with information related to common reactions after a death as well as behaviors that may signal the need for more intensive mental health services.

4. The formal establishment of communications and liaison with community resources is an important relationship to develop prior to any type of crisis. Developing a relationship and crisis plan role with community-based mental health professionals in advance of the need will allow the school to quickly and effectively activate these resources in times of need. They can provide mental health services at the school as well as be available for students and staff who may need more intensive services. Furthermore, mental health experts can assist schools in:

1. Crisis team development
2. Crisis preparedness planning and exercises
3. In-service trainings around school crisis and bereavement
4. Consultation on issues of child development, crisis and bereavement

SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

1. **Suicide of a Student:** The suicide of a student creates unique issues for school personnel.
 1. Clarify with family about information they wish to disclose about the cause of death, but be aware if information has already been shared publicly by a reliable source.
 2. Identify students considered at greatest risk for mental health distress. (Use the same ideas as listed above, especially any students who may have known of the plan or students who may become "scapegoats" after the death.)
 3. Educate students, staff, and parents about warning signs and symptoms of suicide and distribute broadly information about hotlines and support services.
 4. Encourage students to seek help; de-stigmatize and legitimize the importance of mental health services and communication with others who can help.
 5. While being sure to acknowledge the individual who died, avoid romanticizing or glamorizing suicide.
 6. Minimize media coverage of the suicide.
 7. Be aware of any suicides in the larger community by maintaining good communication with other area schools, community mental health providers/agencies, and the police.
2. **Other Situations When the Family May Not Wish to Disclose the Cause of Death** (e.g., drunk driving or other alcohol-related death, overdose, related to self-inflicted or intentional asphyxiation): As with any death of a student, initiate the school crisis plan and support services. Like suicide, the death may present a "window of opportunity" to educate students, staff, and parents about life-threatening behaviors and their consequences. Many of the issues to consider with suicide with also apply to these circumstances.
3. **Circumstances in Which School Liability May be at Issue:** Although the circumstances of the death do not have to be discussed, the death itself will need to be addressed and support services provided to staff and students. Sending letters to parents alerting them of the death as well as available services remains important.
4. **Death of Student or School Personnel When School is Not in Session:** If a death occurs that is likely to impact broadly the school community when school is not in session, such as over the summer or other vacation, involve the school crisis team in developing a plan including how to contact students and staff such as via telephone trees and mailings. School administrators may wish to offer the school building as a place for support services to be offered in the immediate aftermath of the event and may choose to communicate this through public media. When school resumes after the holiday or vacation, additional plans should be in place for notification of those students and staff not previously contacted. Have crisis team members and supportive services available once this information is shared with students and staff.





After a loved one dies—

How children grieve and how parents and other adults can support them.



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After a loved one dies—How children grieve and how parents and other adults can support them.

Written by David J. Schonfeld, MD, and Marcia Quackenbush, MS, MFT, CHES

Dr. Schonfeld is director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, which was established by a generous grant from the September 11th Children's Fund and National Philanthropic Trust. www.schoolcrisiscenter.org

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The information contained in this booklet is not intended as a substitute for your health professional's opinion or care. You and your children have unique needs that may not be addressed in this booklet. If you have concerns, be sure to seek professional advice.



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FOUNDATION



Protecting families and providing them financial security is at the heart of New York Life's business. But we also recognize the tremendous emotional toll suffered by family members—especially children—when they lose a parent, sibling, or other loved one. And helping young people grieve, heal, and grow is part of New York Life's long-term philanthropic commitment to assisting children in need.

This booklet provides valuable guidance to parents and other caregivers who are helping children cope with their grief and fear following a death in the family. Prepared with the assistance of some of the nation's most respected authorities on this important topic, I think you will find their words and suggestions sensible and reassuring.

I wish you the comfort that is found in helping young hearts heal.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Theodore A. Mathas'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'T' and 'M'.

Theodore A. Mathas
Chairman, President and CEO
New York Life



After a loved one dies— How children grieve and how parents and other adults can support them.

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Helping children, helping the family.

When children get support from parents and other adults around them, it helps the entire family cope.

The death of a loved one is difficult for everyone. Children feel the loss strongly. Parents are coping with their own grief. If a parent dies, the surviving parent faces the new responsibility of caring for the children alone. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and family friends are affected, too.

Because children and teens understand death differently from adults, their reactions may be different. Some of the things they say or do may seem puzzling.

This guide reviews how children grieve and how parents and other caring adults can help them understand death better. It offers suggestions for helping children cope. These suggestions are not meant to rush children through their grief or turn them into adults before their time. Rather, they will give them an understanding they can use now, as children, to grieve in a healthy and meaningful way.

When children get support from parents and other adults around them, it helps the entire family cope. There is less confusion, and more understanding of one another. The family sees that it can stay close even though the feelings of grief might be very strong.

How to use this guide.

This guide covers a lot of information. Some of it will apply to your situation, and some of it may not. You can read just the sections that seem most important to you right now. As things change or new situations come up, you may want to read the other sections.

Note: In this guide, “children” refers to children of all ages, including teens, except when talking about a specific age.

Other caring adults.

This guide is geared toward parents and family, but others who work with children may also find it useful. Teachers, coaches, childcare providers, and other caring adults can offer better support to a child who has lost a loved one when they understand more about how children grieve.



Why a parent's role is important.

Your children are experiencing powerful and difficult feelings. They want guidance about what these feelings mean and how to cope. More than anyone else in their lives, they look to you for that guidance.

Your children are concerned for you, too. They wonder how you are coping. They may also worry about your health and survival. Your support and reassurance are most important for them, and can have more impact than anyone else's.

When a parent is grieving.

Talking with your children about a death is especially difficult when you're dealing with your own grief. Children often ask the same questions adults ask themselves at such times: How could something this unfair happen? How can I

go on if I will never get to see this person again? Who wants to live in a world where this can occur? What's going to become of our family now that this person is gone?

Especially in these difficult moments, your love and support are very important to your children. They learn how to deal with their grief by watching what you do to cope. However, if the task of explaining death feels overwhelming to you right now, you may want to have someone else assist you with the discussion. Think about giving that person this guide to read.

You can still have these conversations with your children when you are ready. They will need to discuss this more than once, and it will matter to them because it comes from you.

More than anyone else in their lives, they look to you for guidance.

Helping children understand death.

Children see and hear many of the same things adults do. However, their understanding of what these things mean may be quite different. This is true with death. Adults can help children understand death accurately. This involves more than simply giving them the facts. It means helping them grasp some important new concepts.

Support of this type allows children to understand and adjust to the loss fully as they continue to move forward in their lives.

Four basic concepts about death.

Everyone, including children, must understand four basic concepts about death to grieve fully and come to terms with what has happened. Teens, and even adults, may have a full and rational

understanding of death, yet still struggle to accept these basic concepts when faced with the death of a loved one. It is even harder for young children who do not yet understand the concepts to cope with a loss.

There is wide variation in how well children of the same age understand death based on what they have experienced and the things they have already learned about it.

Don't assume what your children know based on their age. Instead, ask them to talk about their ideas, thoughts, and feelings. As they explain what they already understand about death, you'll be able to see what they still need to learn. Even toddlers can begin to understand some of these basic concepts.

Four basic concepts about death.

1. Death is irreversible.

In cartoons, television shows, and movies, children see characters “die” and then come back to life. In real life, this is not going to happen.

Children who don’t fully understand this concept may view death as a kind of temporary separation. They often think of people who have died as being far away, perhaps on a trip. Sometimes adults reinforce this belief by talking about the person who died as having “gone on a long journey.” Children may feel angry when their loved one doesn’t call or return for important occasions.

If children don’t think of the death as permanent, they have little reason to begin to mourn. Mourning is a painful process that requires people to adjust their ties to the person who has died. An essential first step in this process is understanding and, at some level, accepting that the loss is permanent.

2. All life functions end completely at the time of death.

Very young children view all things as living—their sister, a toy, the mean rock that just “tripped” them. In day-to-day conversations, adults may add to this confusion by talking about the child’s doll being hungry or saying they got home late because the car “died.”

Imaginative play with children is natural and appropriate. But, while adults understand that there’s a difference between pretending a doll is hungry and believing the doll is hungry, this difference may not be clear to a very young child.

Young children are sometimes encouraged to talk to a family member who has died. They may be told their loved one is “watching over them” from heaven. Sometimes children are asked to draw a picture or write a note to the person who died that can be placed in the coffin.

These comments can be confusing and even frightening to some children. If the person who has died could read a note, does it mean he or she will be aware of being in the coffin? Will the person realize he or she has been buried?

Children may know that people can’t move after they’ve died, but believe this is because the coffin is too small. They may know people can’t see after death, but believe this is because it is dark underground. These children may become preoccupied with the physical suffering of the deceased.

When children can correctly identify what living functions are, they can also understand that these functions end completely at the time of death. For example, only living things can think, be afraid, be hungry, or feel pain. Only living things have a beating heart or need air to breathe.

3. Everything that is alive eventually dies.

Children may believe that they and others close to them will never die. Parents often reassure children that they will always be there to take care of them. They tell them not to worry about dying themselves. This wish to shield children from death is understandable. But when a death directly affects children, this reality can no longer be hidden from them. When a parent or other significant person has died, children will usually fear that others close to them—perhaps everyone they care about—will also die.

Children, just like adults, struggle to make sense of a death. If they do not understand that death is an inevitable part of life, they will make mistakes as they figure out why this particular death occurred. They may assume it happened because of something bad they did or something they failed to do. They may think it happened because of bad thoughts they had. This leads to guilt. They may assume the person who died did or thought bad things, or didn't do something he or she should have done. This leads to shame.

These reactions make it difficult for children to adjust to the loss. Many children don't want to talk about the death because it will expose these terrible feelings of guilt and shame.

When you talk to your children about this concept, let them know you are well, and that you are doing everything you can to stay healthy. Explain that you hope and expect to live a very long time, until your children are adults. This is different from telling children that you or they will never die.

4. There are physical reasons someone dies.

Children must understand why their loved one has died. If they don't, they're more likely to come up with explanations that cause guilt or shame.

The goal is to help children feel they understand what has happened. Offer a brief explanation using simple and direct language. Take your cues from your children, and allow them to ask for further explanations. Graphic details aren't necessary and should be avoided, especially if the death was violent.

Explaining death to children.

Talking with your children provides a chance for them to show you their feelings.

Sometimes, children don't react to news of a death the way their parents and other adults expect them to. There are many ways explanations about death can confuse children.

Explanations and terms may not be clear. Adults often choose words they feel are gentler or less frightening for children. They might avoid using the words "dead" or "died," which seem harsh at such an emotional time. But, with these less direct terms, children may not understand what the adult is saying. For example, if an adult tells children that their loved one is now in a state of "eternal sleep," the children may become afraid to go to sleep.

What to do.

Speak gently, but frankly and directly to children. Use the words "dead" and "died."

Children may only understand part of the explanation. Even when adults give clear, direct explanations, children may not fully understand. For example, some children who have been told that the body was placed in a casket worry about where the head has been placed.

What to do.

Check back with your children to see what they understand. You might say, "Let me see if I've explained this well. Please tell me what you understand has happened."



Religious concepts may be confusing.

It is appropriate to share the family's religious beliefs with children when a death has occurred, but remember that religious beliefs may be abstract and difficult for children to understand.

What to do.

Present the facts about what happens to the physical body, as well as the religious beliefs held by the family. For

example, children might first be told that the person has died. His or her body no longer thinks, feels, or sees. The person's entire body has been placed in a casket and buried. In some faiths, the adult might then explain that there is a special part of the person that cannot be seen or touched, which some people call the spirit or soul, and that this part continues on in a place we cannot see or visit, which is called heaven.

How children respond to death.

Children's reactions to a death may communicate their thoughts, feelings, and fears. Sometimes these reactions are confusing to adults. But, when adults understand what children are communicating, everything makes more sense.

Here are some common reactions children may have.

Children may become upset by these discussions. Keep in mind that it isn't the conversation causing distress, but the very painful loss felt from the death of a loved one. Talking with your children provides a chance for them to show you their feelings. When you understand their feelings, it's easier to help them cope with the experience.

What to do.

Pause the conversation if that seems best. Provide support and comfort. Plan to continue the talk another time soon.

Let your children know it's OK to show their feelings. Otherwise, they might try to hide their feelings and deal with them without your support. Let them know it's OK to cry. Crying may help them feel better.

Show them your own feelings. Demonstrate how you are coping. Let your children see you crying, talking with friends, seeking spiritual comfort, or remembering good things about the person who has died.

Children may be reluctant to talk about a recent death. Often this happens because they see that the adults around them are uncomfortable talking about the death. Children may withhold their own comments or questions to avoid upsetting family members. They may believe it's wrong to talk about such things. Older children and teens may turn to peers to discuss the death. They may tell adults close to them that they don't want or need to talk about it.

What to do.

Avoid forcing the issue or getting into power struggles about it.

Continue to invite your children to talk on several occasions over time.

Acknowledge that these conversations can be difficult. Let your children know you find talking helpful.

Help older children and teens identify other adults in their lives with whom they can talk. Look for people who are not as directly affected by the death, such as a teacher, chaplain, school counselor, mental health professional, or a pediatrician or other health care provider.

Maintain an emotional and physical presence with your children. Hug them. Talk about your feelings. Ask about theirs. Even older children and teens need your support and assistance as they cope with the loss.

Children may use play or creative activities such as drawing or writing to express their grief.

Children may express their feelings in ways other than talking. Children may use play or creative activities such as drawing or writing to express their grief. Often, they come to a better understanding of grief through play and creativity. These expressions can give you some important clues about what children are thinking, but be careful not to jump to conclusions. For example, very happy drawings after a traumatic death might give adults the idea that a child is not affected by the death when, in fact, this is more likely a sign that the child is not yet ready to deal with the grieving process.

What to do.

Offer your children opportunities to play, write, draw, paint, dance, make up songs, or do other creative activities.

Ask them to tell you about their artwork. For example, you might say, "Tell me what's happening in this picture you drew." If there are people in the drawing, ask who they are, what they're feeling, whether anyone is missing from the picture, and so on.

If you're worried that your children's play or creative work shows they are having trouble coping with the death, seek outside help. (See the section "Getting help" on page 18.)

Children often feel guilty after a death has occurred. Young children have a limited understanding of why things happen as they do. They often use a process called magical thinking. This means they believe their own thoughts, wishes, and actions can make things happen in the greater world. Adults may reinforce this misconception when they suggest that children make a wish for something they want to happen.

Magical thinking is useful at times. Being able to wish for things to be better in their lives and in the world can help young children feel stronger and more in control. But there's also a downside, because when something bad happens, such as the death of a loved one, children may believe it happened because of something they said, did, thought, or wished.

Older children and teens also usually wonder if there is something they could have done, or should have done, to prevent the death. For example, the parent wouldn't have had a heart attack if the child hadn't misbehaved and caused stress in the family. The car crash wouldn't have happened if the child didn't need to be picked up after school. The cancer wouldn't have progressed if the child had just made sure the loved one had seen a doctor.

When guilt is more likely.

Children are most likely to feel guilty when there have been challenges in the relationship with the person who died, or in the circumstances of the death. Here are some examples:

- The child was angry with the person just before the person died.
 - The death occurred after a long illness, and, at times, the child may have wished the person would die to end everyone's suffering.
 - Some action of the child seems related to the death. For example, a teen got into a heated argument with his mother shortly before she died in a car crash.
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Children and teens usually wonder if there is something they could have done, or should have done, to prevent the death.

Encourage your children to talk with someone they trust.

Children may feel guilty for surviving the death of a sibling. They may also feel guilty if they are having fun or not feeling very sad after a family member has died.

When talking with children about the death of someone close, it's appropriate to assume that some sense of guilt may be present. This will usually be the case even if there is no logical reason for the children to feel responsible.

What to do.

Explain that when painful or "bad" things happen, people often wonder if it was because they did something bad.

Reassure your children that they are not responsible for the death, even if they haven't asked about this directly.

Children often express anger about the death. They may focus on someone they feel is responsible. They may feel angry at God. They may feel angry at the person who died for leaving them. Family members sometimes become the focus of this anger, because they are near and are "safe" targets.

Older children and teens may engage in risky behaviors. They may drive recklessly, get into fights, drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, or use drugs. They may become involved in sexual activity or delinquency. They may start to have problems at school or conflicts with friends.

What to do.

Allow children to express their anger. Avoid being critical about these feelings. Recognize that anger is a normal and natural response.

Help children identify appropriate ways to express their anger. Encourage them to talk about it with someone they trust. Suggest that they do something physical, such as running, sports, dancing, or yard work, or express the anger through creative activities, such as writing or art.

Set limits on inappropriate behaviors. It's not OK for children to hit or hurt others, or for teens to put themselves or others at risk in dangerous situations.

Children may appear to think only about themselves when confronted with a death. At the best of times, children are usually most concerned with the things that affect them personally. At times of stress, such as after the death of someone they care about, they may appear even more self-centered.

At a time of tragedy, we often expect children to rise to the occasion and act more "grown-up." It's true that children who have coped with difficult events often emerge with greater maturity. But, in the moment itself, most children, and even adults, may act less maturely.

Under stress, children may behave as they did at a younger age. For example, children who have recently mastered toilet training may start to have accidents. Children who have been acting with greater independence may become clingy or have difficulty with separation.

Children and teens can also act less mature socially. They may become demanding, refuse to share, or pick fights with family members. They may respond to the death in ways that seem cold or selfish: "Does this mean I can't have my birthday party this weekend?" "Am I still going to be able to go to the college I want?"

Expect your children to think more about themselves when they are grieving, at least at first. Once they feel their needs are being met, they will be able to think more about the needs of others.

What to do.

Continue to show caring and concern for your children.

Remember that your children are still grieving, even when they behave in these ways.

Set appropriate limits on behaviors, but resist the temptation to accuse children of being selfish or uncaring.

Attending funerals and memorials.

When a close friend or relative dies, children should be offered the opportunity to attend the funeral or memorial service whenever possible. Family members sometimes worry that a funeral will be frightening for the children, or that they will not understand what is happening.

But when children are not allowed to attend services, they often create fantasies far more frightening than what actually occurs. They are likely to wonder, "What can they possibly be doing with my mother that is so awful I'm not allowed to see?" They may also feel hurt if they are not included in this important family event. They lose an opportunity to feel the comfort of spiritual and community support provided through services.

You can take steps before, during, and after the service to help your children benefit.

What to do.

Explain what will happen. In simple terms, let your children know what to expect. Where will the service take place? Who will be there? Will there be music?

Describe what people will do at the service. Will guests be crying? Will people share stories? Will people be very serious, or will there be laughter?

Talk about the specific features of the service. Will there be a casket? Will it be an open casket? Will there be a funeral procession or a graveside service?

Answer questions. Encourage your children to ask any questions before the service. Check in with them more than once on this.

Let your children decide whether or not to attend. You can let them know that you'd like them to be there, but don't ask them to participate in any ritual or activity they find frightening or unpleasant. Let them know that they can leave at any point or just take a break for a few minutes.

Find an adult to be with each child. Especially for young children and preteens, find an adult who can stay with each child throughout the service. This person can answer questions, provide comfort, and give the child attention. Ideally, this will be someone the child knows and likes, such as a babysitter or neighbor, who isn't as directly affected by the death. This allows the adult to focus on the child's needs, including leaving the service if the child wishes.

Allow options. Younger children might want to play quietly in the back of the sanctuary, which can still give them a sense of having participated in the ritual in a direct way. Older children or teens may want to invite a close friend to sit with them in the family section.

Offer a role in the service. It may be helpful for children to have a simple task, such as handing out memorial cards or helping to choose flowers or a favorite song for the service. It's important to suggest something that will comfort and not overwhelm the children.

Check in afterward. Be sure to speak to your children after the service and offer them your comfort and love. Over the next few days, ask what they thought of the service. Do they have any feelings they want to share or questions to ask? Are themes from the service showing up in their play or drawings?

Children should be offered the opportunity to attend the funeral or memorial service.



Helping children cope over time.

Grief is not a quick process. People who've lost a family member generally feel that loss throughout their lives. To continue giving your children support, it's important to understand how they may cope with their grief over time.

No child is too young to be affected by the death of someone close. Even infants respond to a death. They miss the familiar presence of a parent who has died. They sense powerful emotions around them, and notice changes in feeding and caregiving routines.

Young children can grieve deeply, even though they may not appear to be doing so. They don't usually sustain strong emotions the way adults do. They may visit their concerns briefly, and then turn to play or schoolwork. This helps them avoid being overwhelmed, but doesn't necessarily mean their concerns have been addressed.

Older children and teens may try to focus their attention on schoolwork, sports, or hobbies. They may assume more responsibilities at home by helping their parents or other children in the family. Encourage your children to continue their friendships with peers and the activities they enjoyed prior to the

death. Even after the death of a family member, it's important for children to keep being children.

Here are some ways adult family members and friends can support children over time.

Help children preserve—and create—memories. Children sometimes worry that they will forget the person who died, especially if they were quite young at the time of the death. The entire family can keep the person's memory alive through stories, pictures, and continued mention of the person in everyday conversation.

Parents can model ways to talk about the person who has died and make his or her memory a part of holidays and other special occasions. Finding ways to recognize and remember what was valuable in the relationship with the person who has died is part of the healing process.

Children often like to have physical reminders of the person who has died. Some children want to carry a picture or object that reminds them of their family member or keep it in a special place in the home. They may keep clothing or a pillow in their room that still has the person's scent on it.

No child is too young to be affected by the death of someone close. Even infants respond to a death.

Parents have these feelings, too.

Parents have many of these same feelings—guilt, anger, confusion, feeling needy or less comfortable doing things on their own. They often want to keep their children nearby at these times, so they can be sure their children are safe. They may look to their children to help them make decisions or provide them with support.

These are natural and appropriate feelings. But it's also important for parents to step back when their children want or need to be more independent. This may happen soon after the death, or several weeks later. Parents also should be careful about giving children responsibilities that would be more appropriate for adults or about asking children to fill the roles of the adult who has died.

Children sometimes worry that they will forget the person who has died.

Anticipate grief triggers. Memories and feelings of grief can be triggered by anniversaries or other important events. The first holiday after the death, the first birthday, the first day of school, a father-daughter dance—any of these might bring up sudden and powerful feelings of sadness.

Everyday events can have an impact as well—a favorite song may come on the radio, a favorite dish might be on the menu at a restaurant, a child might come across an old card from the family member who has died. These grief triggers often catch people off guard. They can be troubling to children who are trying hard not to think about the person who has died.

Help your children understand that these experiences are natural. They will happen less frequently over time, but may continue to be powerful.

Talk to your children's teachers. After a death, children often have difficulty concentrating on their schoolwork. They may benefit from tutoring, support, or temporary changes in test schedules or other classroom demands.

Don't wait until school problems start. Talk to your children's teachers and other key people at the school, such as coaches, band directors, and club sponsors. Describe the loss your family has experienced. By requesting the support of your children's school early on, you're taking steps that can prevent problems from starting.

You may want to talk to the school counselor as well. Even if children don't want to see the counselor, he or she can act as a resource and may be able to help if a situation comes up during the course of the school day that upsets your children or triggers a grief reaction. Counselors can also facilitate planning with classroom teachers.

Talk with the school again when your children change schools or start a new year with new teachers.

Talk to your children's health care provider. After a death occurs, children often worry about their own health and that of others in their family. They're also experiencing greater stress than usual, which can cause a range of physical symptoms, including headaches and stomachaches.

Your children's pediatrician or other health care provider can help identify physical complaints that stem from physical illness, emotional distress, or a combination of the two. Health care providers can also direct you to community resources that help support families experiencing grief, such as bereavement support groups or camps for children who've experienced a similar loss. A health care provider may offer to talk with your children to see what they understand about these events. Sometimes he or she can help children express concerns they may be withholding from the family.

Recognize that grieving can last a lifetime, but should not consume a life.

Children grieve in stages and over many years. At each new stage in their lives, such as when they graduate from school, leave home to go to college, get married, have their own children, or reach the age when a parent died, they will have new skills in thinking and relating to others. They will use these skills to reach a more satisfying explanation of this death. They will build an ever-deeper understanding of its impact on their lives.

In many ways, the work of making meaning from a death never really ends. But, over time, this work becomes less difficult and takes less energy. It may start as a full-time job. Later, it becomes more of a part-time effort that allows other meaningful work and experiences to occur.

Parents often wonder when it's time to encourage children to move on with their lives. Shortly after a death, many children find they are ready to resume their normal day-to-day lives. They find comfort and support in returning to school, spending time with friends, and taking part in the activities they did before the death occurred.

However, some children will take longer to get back to their regular daily tasks. They may wish to stay home from school. Sometimes they worry that harm will come to other family members if they aren't there. Some children stay home because they believe the surviving family members need them nearby. Give your children encouragement. They need to know you are OK, and that you expect and want them to return to school and their other daily activities.

Children may worry that both parents will die and leave them alone. At these

times, children may find comfort in knowing that, even if this highly unlikely event occurs, the family has a plan for who would take care of them. Consider sharing this plan with your children if they express such concerns.

Children often need extra support and attention for a period of time. They might want help with homework because they are having trouble concentrating and learning. You may want to help set up some social time with friends, such as an outing to the park or a trip to the movies.

Getting back to school and a regular routine is important for your children's health and enables them to move along in their grieving process. In general, if children are having trouble getting back to usual routines after several weeks, it's a good idea to seek outside advice. Check with your children's health care provider or school counselor.

By requesting the support of your children's school early on, you're taking steps that can prevent problems from starting.



Getting help.

Children often need extra support and attention for a period of time.

At times of loss, parents do not have to handle all of their children's needs on their own. There is help available. Because parents are often dealing with their own powerful grief, it's especially important for families to reach out for broader support.

Professional resources.

- Your children's teacher or school counseling services
- A pediatrician or other health care provider
- Bereavement support groups for families and children
- Community-based mental health services
- Special camp programs for children who have had a family member die
- Hospice programs

If you believe your children are having difficulty moving forward in the grieving process, or if you simply have questions, one of these resources will be helpful. It's also useful to reach out to other people who care about you and allow them to help. This shows your children that it's OK to ask for and accept support from others.

How others can help.

Many people may want to provide assistance to you and your children, but not know how. They may avoid talking about the death because of their discomfort. They may say or do things that aren't helpful, even though they mean well.

Consider showing these people the guidelines below. These are ways they can offer assistance that will truly support you and your children.

Here are some ideas for you when you're talking with people who want to help.

Let them know what they can do. Be specific. "Drive my daughter to softball practice." "Do the laundry." "Bring us a meal next Wednesday."

Set limits when you need to. It's fine to say, "I appreciate your offer to help, but right now I prefer to spend time alone with my children. I'll call you back when it's a good time for me to talk."

Use an intermediary. Ask someone to organize helpers.

Make a "wish list." Write down tasks you'd like some help with. When people offer to help, show them the list and invite them to choose something.

Supporting families who are grieving: guidelines for giving help.

One of the most important things you can do for families who are grieving is to show you care. Here are some things most families appreciate. Some may suit you better than others.

Offer the kind of help that's a good fit for you.

Offer to spend time with them. Listen if they want to talk. Sit quietly if they just want company.

Don't try to take away the grief. Powerful and painful feelings will be with them for some time. Comments and efforts meant to cheer people up or find something positive in the situation are usually not helpful.

Listen more, talk less. It's fine to share your feelings and express your caring and concern. But it's important to keep the focus on the people who are grieving. Allow them to express their own feelings. Don't tell them how they ought to feel.

Accept strong expressions of feeling. This is an important part of grieving. Encouraging people to "be strong" or cover up their feelings isn't helpful.

Offer to do chores. There are many things that need to be done for the family. Offer something specific, such as cooking a meal, helping with homework, cleaning the kitchen, walking the dog, or driving the children to school or sports practice.



Getting support for your own grief process helps you stay available to your children.

Make contact. Send a card that says you're thinking of them. Make a brief call. Drop off cookies or fresh vegetables from your garden.

Accept "no thanks" gracefully. If a family declines your help for the moment, accept their decision. Be available to support them when they are ready for your calls or visits.

Hang in there. Grieving takes a long time. Offer support over the coming weeks and months. Pay special attention to holidays, anniversaries, and other special occasions.

Taking care of yourself.

The grief processes described in this guide affect adults as well as children.

When a death occurs, adults often feel uncertain and insecure. They may act immature and self-centered under stress. They may be confused about how to move forward.

Sometimes parents are so overwhelmed by the loss of a family member they wonder if they have any energy left to take care of their children. In the face of this grief, it can be difficult to remain patient and understanding of your children's extra needs.

Parents sometimes want to send their children away to be cared for by others, until they feel they are coping better with the loss themselves. While this may be necessary on occasion, in most cases it is not what's best for the children. Remember that it's not a bad thing for your children to see you feeling distressed. Coping doesn't mean you have no pain. It means you feel the grief, and also find ways to move forward.

When your children see you having strong emotions and dealing with these feelings, they learn skills they can use as well.

Getting support for your own grief process helps you stay available to your children as they move through this experience. It's important for your children to know that you have the support of other adults. This allows them to pay attention to their own experience, without feeling responsible for taking care of their parents.

Resources you can turn to include:

- Your primary health care provider
- A community-based bereavement program or hospice service
- Counseling services
- A faith group
- Trustworthy friends and family members
- Web-based support services for people in bereavement

Looking to the future.

New grief can be overwhelming. It may seem as if nothing will ever feel right again. A parent who is trying to help children deal with grief understandably feels challenged. This is why it's helpful to understand some of the facts about grief described in this guide. Grief does change over time. It's not always overwhelming. Life continues to matter.

The sense of loss may not necessarily lessen, but it does become more bearable.

Taking the steps suggested in this guide can help you and your children through this process. Dealing with grief in a direct and honest way is a great gift you can offer your children and is one of the best ways to respect the memory of a loved one who has died.

Resources for support.



www.AChildinGrief.com

New York Life is committed to helping children who have experienced the death of a parent, sibling, or other important person. This website supports the families and teachers of bereaved kids and includes a comprehensive, state-by-state list of local support services, book lists, articles, and materials to order, as well as links to other helpful organizations.



www.schoolcrisiscenter.org

Information on how schools can support children who are dealing with loss.



www.childrengrieve.org

The National Alliance for Grieving Children provides a network for nationwide communication among hundreds of children's bereavement centers who want to share ideas, information, and resources with each other to better support the families they serve in their own communities.



The Coalition to Support Grieving Students brings together the leading professional organizations representing classroom educators (teachers, paraprofessionals, and other instructional staff), principals, assistant principals, superintendents, school board members, central office staff, student support personnel (school counselors, school nurses, school psychologists, school social workers) with one goal: to support students who have lost a parent, sibling, caregiver, or other beloved person. Its website, www.grievingstudents.org, contains resources, endorsed by the entire educational industry, which can empower every adult in every school in the country to comfort a grieving student.

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