



# Providing Support Over Time

## Take-Home Message

School professionals play a unique role in supporting grieving students both in the immediate aftermath of a loss and over time. Children do not adjust to a major loss in a matter of months or a year, but over a lifetime. The second year after a death is often more difficult than the first. Teachers can play a vital role by offering students ongoing understanding and support that can help them make sense of their experiences and stay productive and positive in their lives.

## School Professionals: A Unique Role

When a death occurs in a family, the entire family is grieving. A parent may be preoccupied and less able to manage the details and demands of the family. Children sometimes feel it is better not to burden their parent with additional concerns. A child may feel guilt or shame about the death and find the idea of talking with family overwhelming.

Peers often have limited experience supporting someone who is grieving. Their attempts at support may be awkward. They may pull back because of their own discomfort.

School professionals who are not personally affected by the death in a deep way are often ideal sources of support. They are concerned, accessible, and competent. Students may see them as safer to approach. Often, school professionals are better able to attend to a child's emotional needs.

School personnel are not expected to provide bereavement counseling to children, but rather to provide bereavement support. They can do this best when they work as a team to meet students' needs.



## Goals of Support

The primary goal is to offer support in the areas most likely to present challenges to students after the death of a family member or friend. Teachers can take steps to:

1. Decrease the sense of isolation. When teachers talk about death in the classroom, both as part of regular coursework and in response to a recent event, all students learn more about how to give and receive support.
2. Increase academic function. It's common for grieving children to have difficulty concentrating and have a drop in academic performance. Teachers who talk with children and make appropriate adjustments to their class work can help them stay on course academically.
3. Increase the likelihood children will talk with their families. When children experience support and understanding from teachers, they may find it easier to turn to other adults, including their family members, for support.
4. Increase the likelihood children will talk with and receive support from their peers. Through classroom discussions and one-on-one conversations, teachers can model understanding and give all students better opportunities to listen, understand, and express feelings among their peers.
5. Identify problems in the family. During talks with teachers, students may reveal family issues, such as a parent struggling with depression. Teachers can help arrange appropriate referrals for the family.
6. Connect with students on something of immense importance. These are the kinds of lessons and conversations that can genuinely transform children's lives.

## Grief Over Time

Here are three key features to remember about grief over time for children.

1. Grief proceeds on its own terms. There is no set time frame. There are no firm stages. Children don't get over grief in a fixed amount of time.

The second year after a death can seem even more challenging than the first. However, this is a point where the support and concern available immediately after a death has diminished greatly—sometimes it has virtually disappeared.

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In many ways, children never get over a significant loss. The death of a close family member or friend is a life-changing experience.

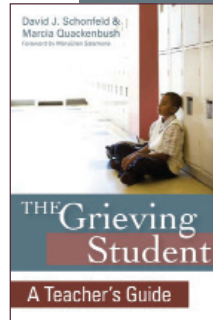
2. As children grow and develop, even normative transitions and changes in their lives will remind them of the loss. A boy whose father died while he was in elementary school may miss him acutely when he enters puberty or transitions to college, at college graduation, when he is married, and when he has children or grandchildren.
3. As children develop, they become more capable of understanding and adjusting to their loss. The work of grieving becomes less difficult and requires less energy. It begins as a full-time job, but becomes more of a part-time effort that allows other meaningful work and experiences to occur.

Grieving lasts a lifetime, but does not need to consume a life.

## Special Events

Children experience grief differently over time, and often revisit deep feelings at special events and times of transition. It can be helpful when teachers make a special effort to contact students at such moments. These may include:

- Holidays
- Birthdays
- Moves to a new grade or school
- Celebrations
- Awards, graduations, recognition
- Rites of passage (first bicycle, first job, first date)



For more information on supporting grieving students, refer to *The Grieving Student: A Teacher's Guide* by David Schonfeld and Marcia Quackenbush.



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