



Willow House

Understanding and Supporting the Needs of Grieving
Children

Illinois School Counselor Association
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Understanding Grief & Grief Reactions by Age

The following are general categories. Not all children will fit "neatly" in to one of these groups. Be mindful that each child is different and grief looks different for everybody.

A Young Child: 3-5 Years of Age

UNDERSTANDING

- Sees death as temporary, believes that the person will return or can be visited
- Has difficulty handling concepts such as heaven, the soul or spirit
- Feels sadness, but often for only a short time and often escapes into play, giving adults the impression the child isn't really grieving
- Substitutes attachment to another person in exchange for attachment to person who died
- Needs a daily routine, structure, affection, and reassurance
- Acting out behaviors include: regression, nightmares, aggression, non-compliance

GRIEF REACTIONS

- A young child will begin to examine death with words.
- A young child understands the profoundness of the event, but may not know that the person is gone.
- A young child's primary expression of feeling will be through his/her play.
- A death affects a young child's sense of security.
- A young child can express strong feelings in his/her sleep and dreams.
- A young child may address a loss more spontaneously than an adult and thus may "recover" from it more quickly.

School-Age Child: 6-10 Years of Age

UNDERSTANDING

- Begins to understand that death is final and permanent
- Begins to have a fear of death and of others dying
- May feel guilt (magical thinking) and blame self for the death
- Has difficulty putting problems and feelings into words
- Often asks concrete and specific questions about the death, the body, etc.
- Identifies strongly with the deceased

GRIEF REACTIONS

- Acting out behaviors include: compulsive care giving, aggression, possessiveness, regression, headaches, stomachaches, phobias
- Language is becoming a more important tool in the processing of a child's grief.
- Physical expressions of the grief a child does not have the words to express.
- The family is a grieving child's main security.
- Peer relationships can help to support a child through a grieving time and help to avoid their feeling different.
- School responsibilities and outcomes may be affected

Pre-Adolescent: 11-13 Years of Age

UNDERSTANDING

- Recognizes that death is inevitable and irreversible
- May view death as punishment
- Retains some elements of magical thinking
- Often very curious and interested in the "gory" details
- May come up with own theories or explanations of the reasons for the death
- May have many practical questions about the body, the funeral, etc.
- Acting out behaviors include: aggression, possessiveness, headaches, stomachaches, phobias, defiance

GRIEF REACTIONS

- The preadolescent is a young person full of changing behaviors when grieving. Emotional turmoil is heightened by physical change.
- The preadolescent may swing back and forth in dependence support from the family to the peers.
- The preadolescent begins to engage in discussion that integrates significant events in his/her life, but physical outlets for emotions are still necessary.

Adolescence: 14-19 Years of Age

UNDERSTANDING

- Nearing adult levels of concepts
- May worry or think about own death
- Often avoids discussions of death
- Fears "looking different"
- May question religious beliefs
- Often angry at the deceased
- May fear the future
- Acting out behaviors include: aggression, possessiveness, headaches, stomachaches, phobias, increased sexual activity, increased drug use, increased risk-taking, defiance, suicidal ideation.

GRIEF REACTIONS

- Discussion of the critical events becomes the primary means of processing grief.
- Teens may feel highly self-conscious about being different due to grief.
- Teens are self-centered and thus have an exaggerated sense of their own role in regards to death.
- Teens may fight their vulnerability in grief because it may cause them to feel more dependent on their family at a time when they are striving for independence.
- Teens are affected physically by the grieving process, especially in their sleeping and eating patterns.

Adapted from the Dougy Center for Grieving Children



Common Grief Reactions in Children & Adolescents

Shock / Apparent lack of feelings - Children grieve **developmentally** and in a way that is different from adults. They grieve at a pace they can tolerate and in “waves” that are more tolerable and consistent with their coping skills.

Physiological Changes - stomachaches, headaches, sleep problems, eating problems (more/less), tightness in throat, nervousness/trembling/shaking, rashes/hives, muscle aches/weakness, tiredness, lack of energy, increase in illnesses, (colds, etc.) due to increased stress, assume symptoms of deceased loved one

Regression - separation anxiety, need to sleep/be with parent all the time, baby talk, bed-wetting, feeling “sick” to avoid school or other social situations, desire to be cuddled or rocked, need to have others do self-care things for them, demanding more attention, regression in social skills

Disorganization and Panic - Who will take care of me? Will I die? Will other family members die? Intensity & complexity of feelings may be overwhelming - cry easily, hypersensitivity, difficulty concentrating, sleeping

Explosive Emotions - anger at the person who died, anger at the death/situation, feelings of frustration, pain, helplessness, fear, sadness, etc. These feelings need to be safely expressed.

Acting-Out - fighting with others, temper tantrums, rage against everything, “I don’t care,” “It doesn’t matter anymore,” “Nothing matters anymore.” Acting out is influenced by feelings of insecurity, i.e. “Don’t get close to anyone because then I’ll lose them.” Acting out is external expression of internal feelings.

Hyper-maturity - opposite of regression, assuming roles of deceased or absent parent. Well-meaning adults may promote this with “You’re the man in the family now.”

Fear - fear of surviving parent(s), siblings or others dying, fear that they are “alone” when parent(s) are not emotionally available, fear of parent(s) crying when they cry, fear of dying themselves

Guilt - “magical thinking” in young children who “wished” parent would go away, etc. and believe they caused the death, belief that because of their “bad “ behavior they deserved for their loved one to die, sibling’s guilt may also be present because they got upset with deceased sibling for taking parents’ attention, for messing up their toys, their room, etc.

Relief - common when death results from suffering, illness and associated stress. Illness has meant a lack of “normalcy,” consistency and safety in their lives. Relief may also be the reaction when a parent was an abuser to child...and this may also lead to guilt.

Sadness - prolonged withdrawal and sadness usually when reality that the deceased will not return sets in, which may be weeks, months or even years after the actual death

Reconciliation – This occurs when the child/teen has the integrated loss of their loved one as a reality and they are moving forward in life without that person. This may lead to return of more normal behaviors, ability to enjoy life again, more energy, and recognition of death and associated feelings as part of life... they are now looking ahead to their future

Partially Adapted from Alan Wolfelt
“Healing The Bereaved Child”

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Identifying High Risk Students

Use the following list to identify students in your school that may be at higher risk during this time and should be watched and followed closely. Students listed below should be considered high risk if only appearing in one category; however, it is important to list each student in all of the categories that are appropriate for the individual.

1. Closest friends/ teammates of the victims. When a staff member dies, list those students who had personal contact/relationship with the staff member.
2. Anyone present during the accident/ suicide/ incident leading to death or was present at the discovery of the body.
3. History of suicide attempts or threats (Please be specific).
4. History of personal or family history with mental disorders such as, but not limited to, depression, substance abuse, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia.
5. Family history of suicide.
6. History of drug/alcohol abuse.
7. Severe behavior problems, i.e. aggression, stealing truancy, etc.
8. Behavior change i.e. failing grades, social isolation, poor hygiene, high anxiety about academic or sports performance
9. Loss history of students. This death and the grieving process is likely to trigger feelings and grieving related to another experience of death.

GIF

***Mission:** The GIF (Grief Information Form) allows teachers to better support the grieving students in their classroom by having the basic information about the death of their parent/caregiver and/or sibling.*

Student's Name	
Student's Date of Birth	

Name of Deceased	
Relationship to Student	
Student's Age when Death Occurred	
Deceased's Date of Birth	
Date of Diagnosis (if applicable)	
Date of Death	
Cause of Death	
Additional Information:	

Name of Deceased	
Relationship to Student	
Student's Age when Death Occurred	
Deceased's Date of Birth	
Date of Diagnosis (if applicable)	
Date of Death	
Cause of Death	
Additional Information:	

Parent/Caregiver Signature		Date of Consent	
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The information below will be filled out at the beginning of the school year by support staff and distributed to each teacher in the student's schedule

School Year	
Date	
School	
Homeroom Teacher and/or Counselor	

School Year	
Date	
School	
Homeroom Teacher and/or Counselor	

School Year	
Date	
School	
Homeroom Teacher and/or Counselor	

School Year	
Date	
School	
Homeroom Teacher and/or Counselor	



A Teacher's Guide about Grieving Students

Grieving students do not need for you to become an instant counselor. They do need for you to be there for them by letting them talk about their fears, concerns and feelings. They need to feel safe and not judged by peers or supervisors.

It's not always easy for teachers to know for sure that a student is mourning the loss of a family member or friend, but some telltale signs include:

A sudden and unexplained absence from school

- ◊ Withdrawal from contact with friends and classmates
- ◊ Unexpected displays of emotion, such as walking out of class or crying during class
- ◊ Difficulty concentrating
- ◊ A decline in academic performance
- ◊ A disheveled, fatigued appearance

There are a variety of experiences that a teacher can encounter once death enters a classroom. And there is no single foolproof method for helping a student through this troubled time but, based on years of experience, I have developed and recommend the following approach:

Have a plan If possible, help the grieving student identify what he or she dreads most about returning to school after the death of a loved one. Come up with a support group for the student or a friend or counselor who the student can go to if the emotional strain becomes too much to bear. Find out how the student would like you to relate his or her loss to the class. Offer creative ideas for ways the student can cope with his or her feelings, such as keeping a journal or expressive drawings.

Talk openly and frankly about the death. This is a sign of respect for the students' integrity and is essential for a teacher's credibility. However, don't force students to talk about the death if they don't want to. Ask a grieving student before he or she returns to school what would work best for them. If the student would like to discuss the death with the class, the teacher should set the tone of the discussion the first day back. Remind students to listen to their grieving classmate and not to minimize or deny their peer's pain. After sharing, let the student decide whether to "return to normal" or opt for more discussion. The opportunity to talk about a death helps "normalize" the event as students hear that others have had similar experiences and provides an outlet for emotional stress.

Stick to a normal school day routine. It is usually better for students to go to school, because there is a comforting sense of routine. Often at times such as this, students feel as if life is out of control. Teachers, however, should not expect academic performance to be at the same level as previously. The student will need time to process the meaning and impact of the death. Lighten the homework load. Give incompletes rather than fail a grieving student.

Set up a Safe Room A safe room is useful when students are mourning a death. The room could be the nurse's or counselor's office or another private room. Its purpose is to provide students with a safe place to process their feelings of grief, which can often be overwhelming. Establish a sign with the student so that they may privately retreat to that room, if needed.

Provide Supportive Activities The purpose is to provide students with opportunities to process their feelings and the meaning of the loss for themselves and to vent their feelings through discussion one on one or in small groups with trained staff members. Activities may also help children better understand how their grieving classmate feels.

Activities that will allow the class to process their feelings about a death will vary according to age group, but general projects that are appropriate for both teenagers and younger children include:

- Writing condolence letters or cards to the family
- Reading fictional or factual accounts about other people's losses
- Drawing pictures that represent grief and loss or related feelings. For younger children, ask: "If sadness were an animal, what would it look like?"
- For a deceased teacher or staff member organize a memorial activity a while after the death, so that students will have time to process their feelings.



Myths and Misperceptions about Grief

Myths, misperceptions and misunderstandings about grief abound. As our culture is a death denying society, it is a grief denying one as well. Part of Willow House's mission is to help increase the public's understanding about the grieving process.

There are several commonly encountered myths about grief – some are explained here along with new ways to think about them, so that we can all be more confident in how we offer support to those who have experienced the death of a loved one:

1. Don't bring up the name of the person who died, so as not to upset the bereaved.

The person who has experienced a recent death may very likely be thinking of the person who died during much of their days. It is usually an effort not to think of their loved one. Your talking about their loved one will not add to the grief, but will probably be met with relief by the bereaved and appreciation to you for remembering their special person. Yes, there may be tears that come, too, but you did not cause them -- you merely helped the bereaved feel comfortable enough to share them.

2) People who are grieving should busy themselves with other things and go out socially.

The bereaved typically have low energy and may have the desire to be alone more than they had before the death. This may be nature's way of helping the bereaved by forcing them to slow down to heal the emotional wounds (just as a person needs to rest more after a physical injury).

3) A bereaved person should not make any major decisions during the first year after a loss.

While there is some wisdom in not rushing into decisions after a death, at times people hearing this advice may hold off on decisions that may actually be helpful during their grief. For instance, if a change or move had been planned before the death occurred, the bereaved person doesn't have to stop those plans if that change will be helpful. Also, sometimes a person or family may need to make a move to be closer to family members who can be supportive both emotionally and with child care after a spouse has died.

4) There are certain right and wrong ways of grieving.

There is no right or wrong with grief. People grieve in their own unique ways, with some being very outwardly emotional and others more reticent. Both may be experiencing deep grief, but show it in different ways. There are, however, times that professional help may be needed. Counseling may be indicated when the bereaved are either self-destructive in their grief through addictions or other means of self-harm, or harmful to others and not able to control their rage.



5) There is a certain time period in which it is normal to grieve.

Grief has no timeline. Some people are able to anticipate the loss and begin grieving before the death. Others don't have the "luxury" of grieving right after the death because they have small children or aging parents to care for. These people may put their grief on hold and it may come out years later. Children may experience repeated episodes of grief with each new developmental stage or special life event (such as a graduation or wedding). Sometimes their grief may not show up until they're able to better handle it. For example, a child whose father died when she was eight may not manifest outward grief until her late teens or twenties.

There are many other misperceptions about grief. Unfortunately, these ideas affect the bereaved by making them question themselves and their sanity. If you are trying to help someone who is grieving, remaining open to hearing about their experience without placing judgment or giving unsolicited advice is the best way of showing you care.



SECONDARY LOSSES

When a beloved family member or friend dies, we don't just lose the presence of that person as we knew them. As a result of the death, we may lose many other connections to ourselves and to our world. Children and teens feel these secondary losses and these losses and changes can impact their development significantly. In working with grieving children, keep in mind the following common secondary losses that can make the grief experience more complex and challenging.

LOSS OF SELF

- self
- identity
- self-confidence
- health
- personality

LOSS OF SECURITY

- emotional security
- physical security
- fiscal security
- lifestyle

LOSS OF MEANING

- goals & dreams
- faith
- will/desire to live
- joy

Adapted from Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D. "Healing The Bereaved Child"

Memories in a Jar

“Memories in a Jar” - each group member gets a small jar/container and several paper hearts and circles which will represent the following:

Hearts - Memories I shared with my loved one that I'd like to keep/remember. Examples: going to a concert, their laughter, picking out a tree.

Circles - Memories that happened after my loved one died that I didn't get to share with him/her. Examples: 8th grade graduation, vacation, 10th birthday

NOTE: Encourage the group to fill out their “hearts” or memories shared with their loved ones first. Then, once everyone has filled out the hearts, pass out the circles. The circles are used for things that happened since their loved one has died. Having the group fill out the hearts and circles in two separate steps will help them think through each type of memory and help cut down on any possible confusion about the activity.

After adding as many important past/new memories as possible to both the circles and hearts, the “memories” can collectively be discussed with the group.

1. Since the holidays are approaching, it will be important to discuss the holiday rituals and traditions that were enjoyed while the loved one who died was alive. Will some of these traditions be carried on?
2. Often holidays are a difficult time for families dealing with the death of a loved one. How might this affect you and what can you do to help yourself cope with difficulties that arise?
3. How would it feel to talk about some of these important memories with family members now? How would your family members respond to your sharing memories about your loved one who died?
4. Discuss new memories we've made since our loved one died.
 - a. How do you imagine your loved one would feel about these new things you've done?
 - b. Do you think your loved one had/has any influence on important things you have done, even though they are not here with you today.
5. Discuss how we “continue bonds” with our loved ones even after they die. They may not be here with us physically, but the very important relationship we had with our loved ones continues to impact the decisions we make and things we do every day.

Handout: Coping During the Holidays

This handout should be provided to the adult groups.

Memories in a Jar

Ending Ritual

Make sure to end the group by passing the heart stone and thanking the children for sharing and for being a part of the Willow House family.

Supplies

Holiday Spinner

Construction Paper

Markers

Glue

Scissors

Jars

Colored Paper Circles

Colored Paper Hearts

Markers and pens

Handouts



Books about Grief and Death for Children

Aarvy Aardvark Finds Hope by Donna O'Toole

With the help of his friend, Ralph Rabbit, Aarvy Aardvark comes to terms with the loss of his mother and brother. The difficulties and long time needed to begin to feel better after a loss are illustrated well in this story. The illustrations can be colored by children as they please.

After The Funeral by Jane Loretta Winsch

This book offers multicultural illustrations and clear suggestions to encourage honest communication about death and dying with children. It helps young people articulate questions and identify the feelings they often have when facing loss.

Badger's Parting Gifts by Susan Varley

Following Badger's peaceful death, his friends recall their special memories of how he taught each of them something special- Badger's parting gifts.

Beyond the Ridge by Paul Goble

At her death an elderly Native American woman experiences an afterlife believed in by her people, beyond the ridge to a more beautiful world.

Charlotte's Web by E. B. White

Charlotte, the spider, and Wilbur, the pig, become loving friends. When Charlotte dies, Wilbur holds her memory close and takes care of her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. The story describes the sadness experienced by loving friends and how memories are kept alive.

Don't Despair on Thursdays! by Adolph Moser

Compassion books list this as "one of the best books we have ever seen to explain grief to children." Children are sure to be comforted by the friendly illustrations and the kindly way the author speaks to them. Losses of all kinds are named and validated.

The Fall of Freddie the Leaf by Leo Buscaglia

This story tells how Freddie and his friends, all leaves, change with seasons, finally falling to the ground with winter's snow. Both children and adults will respond to this sensitive treatment of the delicate balance between life and death. The photographs are very effective.

Lifetimes by Brian Mellonie and Robert Ingpen

This best selling classic uses nature to explain to children that dying is as much a part of life as being born. *Lifetimes* is about beginnings and endings as well as about living in between.

The Next Place by Warren Hanson

Striking illustrations and a first person text describe "the next place" the storyteller will go. The book presents a very peaceful and attractive description of the afterlife and is not overtly religious--does not identify with any particular religion. Many have found this book very comforting and helpful.

The Rag Coat by Lauren Mills

Minna proudly wears her new coat made of clothing scraps, including her dead papa's work clothes. At school the other children laugh at her coat until she tells them stories behind the scraps.

Sad Isn't Bad by Michaelene Mundy

This friendly guidebook gives children (and those who care for them) a comforting and realistic look at loss—loaded with positive, life-affirming hints for coping with loss as a child. It's a book that promotes healthy grief—and growth.

Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes by Eleanor Coerr

Based on Eleanor Coerr's previously published Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes, this retelling of the story and message of peace, are accompanied by the illustrations of Caldecott medalist Ed Young.

The Saddest Time by Norma Simon

Three separate stories depict children's experience with the death of an uncle, an eight-year-old friend and a grandmother.

The Spirit of Uncle Fernando by Janice Levy

This very beautifully informative story unfolds as young Fernando and his family prepare for The Day of the Dead. Each page of the story is presented in English and Spanish.

Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing After Loss by Pat Schwiebert and Chuck DeKlyen

Grandy, "an old and somewhat wise woman," sets out to make tear soup as a way to cope with her loss. With wonderful illustrations, making tear soup is used very creatively as a metaphor for mourning. The story deals with wisdom about coping and about supporting others in their grief. It is a story that is also very appropriate for use with adults.

A Terrible Thing Happened by Margaret Holmes

Sherman Smith (a raccoon) "saw the most terrible thing." The terrible thing is never defined which allows many children in many different situations to identify with Sherman. He tries not to think about it, but this doesn't work. Eventually, Sherman talks to Ms. Maple who helps Sherman draw pictures and talk. With Ms. Maple's help, Sherman learns to cope and feel better.

What On Earth Do You Do When Someone Dies? by Trevor Romain

This book helps young people through the pain of losing a loved one by answering in simple, honest words many of the questions that are part of the grieving process. Offers practical strategies for dealing with the overwhelming emotions one experiences when grieving.



Books about Grief and Death for Teens

Facing Change: Coming Together & Falling Apart in the Teen Years (1995) by Donna O'Toole

This informative book helps teens understand their losses and discover creative coping strategies to deal with them. Includes: Recognizing and understanding loss, common ways loss is experienced, creative coping choices, charting, finding, and using a support system, things you can do to help yourself through grief, finding and using help from others, bouncing back - the art of growing through grief, resiliency - the art of grieving and growing, seventy-five coping strategies to help yourself, How to know you're making progress.

The Grieving Teen: A Guide for Teenagers and Their Friends (2000) by Helen Fitzgerald

In this unique and compassionate guide, renowned grief counselor Helen Fitzgerald turns her attention to the special needs of adolescents struggling with loss and gives them the tools they need to work through their pain and grief. Fitzgerald adeptly covers the entire range of situations whether the cause was old age, terminal illness, school violence, or suicide. She helps teens address new situations they will face, including family changes, issues with friends, problems at school, and the courage needed to move forward with one's own life.

Healing Your Grieving Heart for Teens: 100 Practical Ideas (2001) by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

With sensitivity and insight, this book offers suggestions for healing activities that can help survivors learn to express their grief and mourn naturally. Acknowledging that death is a painful, ongoing part of life, they explain how people embrace their feelings of loss, and seek and accept support when a loved one dies. These ideas and activities are aimed at reducing the confusion, anxiety, and huge personal void so that the living can begin their lives again. Included in the books for teens and kids are age-appropriate activities that teach younger people that their thoughts are not only normal but necessary.

Healing Your Grieving Heart Journal for Teens (2002) by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

In light of how difficult it is just to survive the teenage years, the grieving process can be especially difficult and overwhelming for teenagers. This journal affirms the grieving teen's journey and offers gentle, healing guidance. In order to sort through their confusing feelings and thoughts, teens are prompted to explore simple, open-ended questions. Teens are encouraged to write what they miss about the person who died, the specific feelings that have been most difficult since the death, or the things they wish they had said to the person before they died.

How it Feels When a Parent Dies (1988) by Jill Kremenz

Eighteen children from age 7 - 17, speak openly of their experiences and feelings. As they speak we see them in photos with their surviving parent and with other family members, in the midst of their everyday lives.

Living When a Young Friend Commits Suicide (Or Even Starts Talking About It) (1999) by Earl A. Grollman

In the last thirty years, the suicide rate among young people has tripled. In this book addressed to the young survivors of this epidemic, Earl A. Grollman, the internationally known lecturer, writer, and grief counselor, and Max Malikow, a psychotherapist and pastoral counselor, offer solace and guidance to adolescents who are confronted with someone of their own age who is contemplating or has committed suicide.

Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers (1993) by Earl A. Grollman

If you are a teenager whose friend or relative has died, this book was written for you. Earl A. Grollman, the award-winning author of *Living When a Loved One Has Died*, explains what to expect when you lose someone you love.

Weird is Normal When Teenagers Grieve (2010) by Jenny Lee Wheeler

Teens grieve differently from adults and often get lost in the shuffle after the death of a loved one. *Weird Is Normal When Teenagers Grieve* is unique because it is a self-help book for grieving teens written by an actively grieving teen. Author Jenny Lee Wheeler lost her father to cancer when she was fourteen and validates for her peers that they have the right to grieve in their own way and according to their own timetable, that their grief attacks might be different from those of adults around them, and that they aren't going crazy if they see signs from their loved one.

When a Friend Dies (2005) by Marilyn E. Gootman, Ed. D.

The death of a friend is a wrenching event for anyone at any age. This sensitive book answers questions grieving teens often have, like "How should I be acting?" "Is it wrong to go to parties and have fun?" and "What if I can't handle my grief on my own?" The advice is gentle, non-preachy, and compassionate. The revised edition includes new quotes from teens, new resources, and new insights into losing a friend through violence.

You Are Not Alone: Teens Talk About Life After the Loss of a Parent (2005) by Lynne B. Hughes

Loss is one of the most isolating experiences there is, and kids who have lost a parent feel especially different than those around them. Comfort Zone Camp was founded as a safe place for grieving children, and now this very special healing experience can reach an even larger audience of children and the people who care for them. Through frank and accessible testimonials, Lynne Hughes and the kids of CZC share the most difficult parts of their losses and offer their own experiences of what helps, what doesn't, what "stinks," and ways to stay connected to their loved ones.