

SUPPORTING OUR YOUTH

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. Out-of-school programs can help minimize these difficulties and foster recovery and resiliency. The skillful and informed response of adults to a child's or adolescent's grief can serve as a vital source of support and stability during a difficult time. Although this booklet is geared specifically to youth-serving professionals, the information and the message is relevant for all adults who support youth. We hope you will read this booklet and share these resources and what you have learned with others in your community.



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 booklet offers advice to youth-serving professionals about how to support children who are grieving and how their peers 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.

Printed and digital copies available at:
https://bereavement.newyorklifestore.com/

*Throughout this booklet, "children" refers to children and adolescents, unless otherwise indicated.

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. Youth-serving professionals 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 community, you may find yourself struggling with your own feelings. When many in the program 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 children 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 helps everyone recognize, feel, and cope with the strong emotions.You can help children understand what has happened.

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When speaking with children about the death of a family member or friend, 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.

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 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 children and youth to talk.

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 or their pediatric healthcare provider. 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. Focus on children's personal loss and associated feelings. 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.



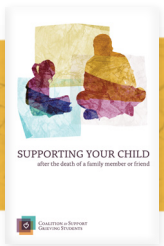
Children may appear selfish and immature after a personal loss.

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. While maintaining rules that make sure all children in the program feel safe and respected, 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 program personnel and appreciate your concern.

Youth-serving professionals 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 family member or friend 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 okay 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 the school or out-of-school program. 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.

Talk with your students about how to handle these triggers if they happen in your program. 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 schedules or other demands. Don't wait for problems to start before offering help. Talk to grieving children and their parents/caregivers and encourage them to talk with your key people at the school, such as teachers, coaches, band directors, and club sponsors. They may want to talk to the school counselor as well. Even if children 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 adults in your program who interact with the children.



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 Guide for Schools (Baltimore: Brookes Publishing, 2021).

You can locate bereavement resources in your state and community at **www.nylgriefresources.org**.

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 to Support Grieving Students

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www.grievingstudents.org
www.nylgriefsensitiveschools.com
www.newyorklife.com/foundation

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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.

Coalition to Support Grieving Students

Lead Founding Members

Children's Hospital Los Angeles — National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

New York Life Foundation

Founding Members

AASA, The School Superintendents Association

American Federation of School Administrators

aft

American School Counselor Association

nea National Education Association

naesp National Association of Elementary School Principals

NASN National Association of School Nurses

NASP National Association of School Psychologists

nassp national association of secondary school principals

School Social Work Association of America

About the Grief-Sensitive Schools Initiative®

New York Life created a pioneering program known as the Grief-Sensitive Schools Initiative® (GSSI) with the aim of enhancing the preparedness of educators and school staff in assisting students dealing with grief. In line with our commitment to a comprehensive approach, we are now expanding this initiative to provide support for professional staff of youth-serving organizations. GSSI+, much like its predecessor GSSI, will introduce the Coalition to Support Grieving Students resource and additional bereavement tools to further equip personnel in effectively aiding grieving youth. Our ultimate objective is to encourage every youth-serving organization to aspire to become a "Grief-Sensitive" organization.

Grief-Sensitive Schools Initiative®