



PalliativeCare  
AUSTRALIA



# Teachers supporting students at school

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When a student in your class has died, or has had a sibling die, you may not know what to say or do. It is important to reach out to the family as your concern and desire to support may be of comfort to them. You may also need to communicate the news to students and broader school community.

## After being notified of the child's death

Your school should have a policy and procedure on what to do following the death of a student. Even if you're not sure what to say, talking to the family is better than saying nothing at all. Simple gestures like an email, a phone call, or a card are some ways of showing that you are thinking of them.

You need to ask the parents what they want your class and school community to know about their child's death, or how you can support their sibling's return to school.

## Sharing news

If the parents would like you to share the news, your class should be told about the death as soon as possible. An informal setting is preferable, such as sitting in a circle on the floor of the classroom. If your school has a counsellor or student support person, include them in the conversation and encourage students to talk to them if they would like to.

Take your time and allow for silence, sharing stories and questions. Questions are a normal part of the grieving process. Answer any questions truthfully and at an appropriate time, it is okay to tell your students that you don't know the answer. Talk to your class about how grief affects people, and encourage them to share how they feel. A way to do this is to discuss what types of deaths or losses your students have experienced and what helped them to cope.

You should also contact the parents of your students, so they are aware and can support their children at home.

## How do children understand death?

It is hard to divide children's understanding of death into age groups because children have different life experiences. Children may have had a family member, friend or pet die whilst others have had no experience of death. This will have an influence on their understanding of what death is.

It is important not to make assumptions of what your student's understanding of death is. You may be able to gain an understanding of what they think death is and why it occurs by talking to them about it. In general:

- › Children aged 0–2 years understand 'here' and 'not here' and whilst they can sense loss, they cannot understand death.
- › Children aged 3–5 years see death as temporary and they expect the person to return.
- › Children aged 6–10 years understand that death is forever and there are different causes of death. They may be curious about death, funerals and cemeteries.
- › Children aged 11 and older start to perceive death as an adult would. They may look for the meaning of death and ask more questions.

## Memory making and funerals

Depending on the age of the child that has died, their friends may want to attend their funeral or memorial service. Attendance to this event should be a decision made by the student and their parents, taking into account the wishes of the family of the child who has died. The family of the child who has died may desire an alternative school memorial or assembly to be held for their classmates to attend. Discuss the plans with the family and school leadership team before telling students or parents.

### *Provide opportunities for expression*

Many children respond well to creative outlets and there are a range of activities that you can do with your students to encourage them to process and express their grief, including:

- › drawing and painting
- › reading and storytelling
- › writing poetry or letters to the person who has died or their family
- › craft activities e.g. making a memory box or collage
- › music and dance

These activities can be adapted to suit their age and development level.

## Common grief responses in children

### *Common signs of grief in preschool-aged children*

Preschool aged children aged under 5 may:

- › be affected by emotions of those around them that they don't understand
- › grieve in doses, alternating between displaying grief and playing as if nothing has happened
- › have a matter-of-fact curiosity about death and ask confronting questions
- › become fussy, irritable, withdrawn, or show signs of insecurity
- › have distressing dreams and nightmares
- › experience restless sleep
- › have difficulty concentrating or making choices
- › act or behave in ways that are younger than they are, e.g. bed wetting or clinging behaviour

- › feel bewildered and physically search for their loved one who has died

### *Common signs of grief in primary-school aged children*

Primary school aged children between 6 and 12 may:

- › experience a difficult transition period, want to see death as reversible and believe death only happens to other people
- › be very curious about death and burial rituals and ask detailed questions
- › imagine death as a bogeyman or ghost
- › play games pretending to die
- › be angry over the death and focus their anger at certain people or at anyone involved with the death, e.g. doctors, parents, teachers
- › take time to absorb the reality of what has happened and might not appear to be immediately affected by the death
- › be quick to blame themselves
- › feel guilty that they survived when their sibling did not
- › experience disturbed sleep, decreased appetite, poor school performance or have physical reactions, e.g. headaches, stomach upsets
- › worry about who will look after them if a parent or other caregiver dies
- › 'act out' feelings rather than talk about them

### *Common grief responses in high school aged children*

Like adults, every teenager is different, however there are some common factors that may affect them.

Teenagers may:

- › grieve in doses, breaking up their grief into bearable amounts, however this can often manifest in intense outbursts
- › experience a multitude of emotions that can come and go in waves
- › seem out of character and unpredictable
- › not want to talk about their grief
- › have problems sleeping, or oversleeping
- › feel alienated from their peers

## Supporting siblings

When a sibling returns to school, prepare your class for making them feel comfortable and supported.

Provide flexibility and support to your grieving student upon their return to school. Recognise that they might have difficulty concentrating on school work.

Work with the student and their parents to develop coping strategies. Ensure you have a plan in place if your student needs some quiet time, time out of class or some one-on-one time with you. Ensure that the student has a person available to talk with, such as a trusted teacher or a school counsellor.

## Some things that might help

- › acknowledging the death and expressing your concern
- › allowing your students to talk and express their feelings as much as they are able
- › being available to listen
- › following routine to provide a sense of safety and comfort at school
- › setting limits to ensure a secure and safe environment for all your students
- › recognising that grief has no time limit and varies from person to person
- › continuing to show support beyond the first few months

## Some things that might not help

- › waiting until you know the perfect thing to say
- › refusing to acknowledge the death
- › changing the subject when the student mentions the child who died
- › making any comments which suggest blame or fault
- › saying that you know how they feel
- › making judgements about the progress of their grief
- › telling them not to cry

## When to seek help

With good information, love and support, children and teenagers can learn to understand and work with their grief. However, if you are concerned by their behaviour, or feel that they need more assistance than you can provide, then don't hesitate to speak with the child's parents, a school counsellor or a senior staff member.

## Looking after yourself

People who support children with life-limiting illnesses, their families and peers, should be aware of their own stress and resilience, to best care for themselves, their families, colleagues and students. Schools may have options in place to support staff wellbeing and care. If you are concerned about yourself or someone you care for, it may also be helpful to consider additional support or counselling.

An extensive list of organisations that provide information and support is available from the website.

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