

HIGHMARK.

**CARING PLACE** 

finding hope in grief

Tips for educators  
and families

# Caring for grieving students



# Understanding grieving students

For students, school is often a place of routine. But grief can disrupt everything, making it tough to focus, learn, and socialize. Children might have trouble showing how they feel or understanding what they're going through, which can lead to problems with their behavior and schoolwork.

Other students and teachers might not know what to do or say, adding stress to the grieving student. If the whole school understands grief better, it can be kinder and more supportive. This will help students deal with their loss and keep up with their learning.



# Grieving behaviors

Observe the unique ways grief affects students. By recognizing the behavioral signs, you can provide targeted support.

## Forgetful

A grieving student may drop all their learned school habits. They may forget to complete homework or turn it in. They can lose signed forms or show up without supplies.

### What you can do:

Help them stay organized. Adjust assignments as you can, especially at the outset.

## Scared

Fear is often an undercurrent. A grieving child may worry, “Who will die next?” Which leads to, “And who will take care of me then?” Many children feel too afraid to let parents out of their sight.

### What you can do:

Allow brief check-ins with family during the school day.

## Tearful

Bursts of grief are common for griever of every age. They can come on at any time, or be prompted by another student’s casual reference to their family.

### What you can do:

If you can, prepare your room to expect it. Offer the student a private space if they wish.

## Distracted

They may daydream and look out the window. They may act irritable and find focusing difficult.

### What you can do:

Offer a quiet space to work or extra time for assignments.



# Creating a supportive system

Grief disrupts learning, so school support is vital. It helps students cope, stay connected, and succeed academically despite their loss.

## Engage parents more.

Though their parents may also be mourning, a student's family can still support their academics. Create a communication plan to share school expectations and homework needs.

## Provide a photo keychain.

Find a clear plastic photo holder on a keychain. The child can insert one or two photos of the people who bring them comfort, kept in their pocket, and pull it out when they need reassurance.

## Allow phone calls.

Short daily calls to family will let them know their families are safe so the child can continue their day.

## Designate a support person.

Ask a nurse, guidance counselor, or teacher's aide to be the person the child goes to outside the classroom. Support might be talking, simply being present with the student, or giving them an escape from the pressures of class.

## Offer a grief pass.

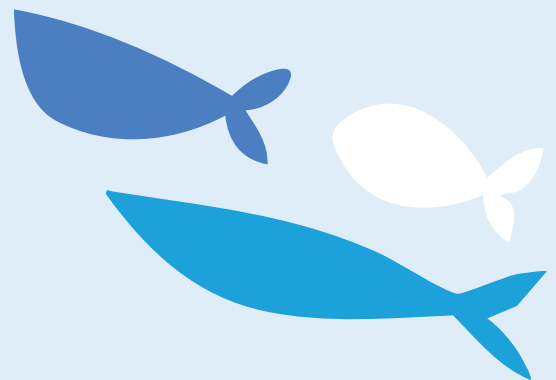
Choose an object or create a "grief pass" to leave on the corner of their desk. Then they can get up and leave the classroom to go to their designated support person or area without having to ask first.

## Be sensitive to important dates.

Ask your student about anniversaries and birthdays related to their deceased loved one. Put them in your calendar and be mindful as you approach those days.

## Take them aside to talk.

Sometimes adults mistakenly keep a low profile with grieving kids. The child needs to know their teachers are open and willing to listen.



# Preparing the rest of your class

After a classmate experiences a death, you can help the rest of the class through its own anxiety and uneasiness.

## **Discuss grief with the class.**

After the school has contacted the family and received permission to share the death with the class, talk about how grief affects people. Encourage students to share how they feel themselves, perhaps by discussing what losses or deaths they've experienced, and what helped them cope.

## **Think of difficulties the returning student may have at school.**

Ask the class how they'd want to be treated if they were returning to school after a death. Most grieving students say that they want to be treated the same as before. They don't like people being "extra nice." While they don't want to be in the spotlight, they also don't want people to act like nothing happened.

## **Explore ways to reach out to a grieving classmate.**

For example, they can send cards or pictures to the child and their family. If classmates knew the person who died, they might share memories of that person in their cards.



**Anticipate some changes in the returning student's behavior.**

Explain that their friend may act differently for a time, which is typical for someone grieving. They may act withdrawn, or intensely angry or sad.

**Be alert to other children reacting to a friend's loss.**

Some students may also need extra support. Their own feelings of loss might surface if they had someone close to them die.

**Provide guidance for the students.**

Many children need help communicating condolences and comfort messages. Help them decide what to say.



## Helping grieving children and families heal over a lifetime

Our mission is to create a world of compassionate communities where all people can find hope and healing after the death of a loved one. We provide grief support for families and individuals of all ages through peer groups, education, and advocacy.

### Where to find us

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