

***April 7, 2025***

The profound emotional response to loss known as grief is an unwelcome visitor that inevitably finds its way into the lives of students, affecting their emotional landscape in deep and lasting ways. In schools, where routines, expectations and learning environments shape daily experiences, the presence of grief can disrupt the equilibrium, casting a shadow on the vibrant world of education. Whether triggered by personal loss (i.e., death, divorce, loss of a pet, end of a friendship, job loss, etc.), community tragedy or global events, the impact of grief within the school setting is complex, demanding both sensitivity and support from educators and peers alike. Addressing grief in schools is not just about navigating the emotional aftermath; it's about fostering resilience, empathy and a safe space for healing amidst the academic journey.

When students navigate the tumultuous terrain of grief during a period of bereavement, educators become beacons of solace and support within the school community. Their empathetic presence and understanding can serve as a stabilizing force during such turbulent times. Small gestures, such as a heartfelt conversation, a comforting smile or the flexibility to accommodate emotional needs, hold immense power in the healing process. Educators possess the unique ability to create a nurturing environment where students feel understood, validated and not alone. Their patience, kindness and willingness to listen can profoundly influence a student's journey through grief, fostering resilience and providing a sense of security, structure and predictability amid the storm. The impact of educators during these moments extends far beyond the classroom, shaping the way students perceive and navigate their emotions in the broader context of life.

Educators, while pillars of support, do not carry the weight of having all the answers or playing the role of therapists in guiding students through times of hardship or grief. Acknowledging this reality is crucial in fostering an environment where educators can focus on what they do best: nurturing learning and empathy. Equipping school staff with resources, tools and guidance is essential to empower them in providing effective support. Training sessions, access to mental health professionals and educational materials tailored to handling grief can offer invaluable assistance. These resources serve as compass points, guiding school staff in understanding the dynamics of grief, recognizing signs of distress and implementing strategies to create a safe and empathetic space for students. By providing this support, schools enable staff to offer genuine care while maintaining appropriate boundaries and recognizing when professional intervention might be necessary, ultimately creating a robust network of support for students in need.

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Type of Grief	Description
<b>Normal Grief</b>	A typical response to loss, involving various emotional stages such as denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.
<b>Anticipatory Grief</b>	Grief that occurs before an expected loss, allowing individuals to begin processing emotions and preparing for the impending loss.
<b>Complicated Grief</b>	Persistent and prolonged grief that hinders daily functioning and extends beyond expected time frames, often accompanied by intense emotions and difficulty adapting to life changes.
<b>Disenfranchised Grief</b>	Grief that is not openly acknowledged or socially supported, such as the loss of a pet, the end of a non-traditional relationship, or certain types of traumas.
<b>Collective Grief</b>	Grief felt by a community or society due to shared experiences of loss, such as natural disasters, mass tragedies or socio-political events.
<b>Chronic Grief</b>	Persistent sorrow that lasts for an extended period, without resolution or ease, is often associated with ongoing challenges or circumstances.

Educators play a crucial role in supporting students who are experiencing grief. Understanding how grief impacts students at different ages can help educators provide appropriate support and accommodations. This chart outlines the common characteristics of grief at different developmental ages and suggests corresponding roles and strategies for educators to support grieving students effectively. It's important for educators to approach each student with empathy, flexibility, and sensitivity to their individual needs during times of grief. For additional information on grief and how educators can support students through this process, visit the [National Association of School Psychology](#) and the [Kentucky Center for Grieving Children and Families](#).

Developmental Age	Common Characteristics of Grief	Educator's Role
<b>Early Childhood</b>	Confusion, fear, regression in behavior, decreased verbalization and understanding of the permanence of loss has not yet developed.	Provide reassurance, simple explanations and predictable routines are helpful and encouraged, referrals for counseling support when grief is prolonged or more intense.

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Developmental Age	Common Characteristics of Grief	Educator's Role
<b>Elementary School</b>	Questioning, guilt, emotional expression (irritability, withdrawal, aggression and sensitivity), somatic complaints*, re-telling of the event, changes in appetite, decreased academic performance, an understanding that loss/death is permanent and that all beings will die is developing.	Validate feelings, encourage expression through play and art, predictable routines are helpful and encouraged, regular physical activity, referrals for counseling support when grief is prolonged or more intense.
<b>Middle School</b>	Decreased academic performance, struggles with attention/concentration; avoidance, withdrawal, high risk behaviors or substance abuse, difficulty with peer relations, nightmares, somatic complaints, self-harm, changes in appetite, emotional numbing or depression, a full understanding that loss/death is permanent, personal and universal has developed.	Offer support groups, foster open communication, encourage routines, flexibility with academic requirements, reinforce safety in the classroom, recognize the impact on grief with academic work and classroom behavior, referrals for counseling support when grief is prolonged or more intense.
<b>High School</b>	Intense emotions, existential questioning, decreased academic performance, difficulties with attention/concentration; somatic symptoms, avoidance, withdrawal, high risk behaviors or substance abuse, self-harm, suicidal ideation, difficulty with peer relations, nightmares, emotional numbing or depression, a full understanding that loss/death is permanent, personal and universal has developed.	Offer support groups, foster open communication, encourage routines, flexibility with academic requirements, reinforce safety in the classroom, recognize the impact on grief with academic work and classroom behavior, referrals for counseling support when grief is prolonged or more intense.

*\*Somatic complaints or symptoms could include pain, fatigue or other physical ailments related to emotional or psychological distress.*

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For Teacher and Staff Training Resources, visit the [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#) to view an array of training modules, guides and printable resources that integrate into comprehensive professional development plans, aiding school staff in understanding grief and delivering essential support.

Please refer to your district crisis response plan as well as the district trauma-informed plan for district-specific information regarding crisis response due to the death of a student, staff member, community member, natural disaster or another crisis.

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