Supporting grieving students

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www.schoolcrisiscenter.org
1-877-536-NCSCB (1-877-536-2722)
www.grievingstudents.org
Loss is common in the lives of children

- Vast majority of children experience the death of a family member and/or friend by the time they complete high school
- 5% of children experience death of parent by 16
Survey of >1200 AFT members

- AFT, New York Life Foundation, Tiller Inc, Hart Research Associates
- 92% reported grief is serious problem that deserves more attention in schools
- Single most important barrier preventing teachers from providing support -- insufficient training and/or professional development
- 93% of classroom teachers never received bereavement training; 3% of schools/districts offer training
Children may not appear to be grieving

• Adults may communicate death is not discussed
• Children may
  – not yet understand what has happened or its implications
  – be overwhelmed by feelings
  – express grief indirectly through behavior or play
  – Choose to keep their losses private
Often adults say nothing

• Adults are afraid to say the wrong thing, upset children, or make matters worse
• Saying nothing says a lot – it communicates that adults are unconcerned, uncaring, or unable to be of assistance
• Leaves young children confused, older children unsupported, and requires children of all ages to grieve alone
Being with someone in distress

- Do not try to “cheer up” survivors
- Do not encourage to be strong or cover emotions
- Express feelings and demonstrate empathy
- Avoid statements such as: “I know exactly what you are going through” (you can’t), “You must be angry” (don’t tell person how to feel), “Both my parents died when I was your age” (don’t compete for sympathy)
- Allow child/family to be upset and tolerate unpleasant affect, without trying to change it. Accept reactions while suspending judgment – intervene only when safety/health is concern
Children’s guilt

• Thought processes limited by:
  – Egocentrism
  – Limited understanding of causality
  – Magical thinking
• Results in guilt
  – Reassure children of lack of responsibility
Misconceptions & literal misinterpretations

- For young children, thought processes are concrete and literal
- Religious explanations can be shared, but should not be only explanation of death
After a loved one dies—
How children grieve and how parents and other adults can support them.

www.achildingrief.com
Adolescent bereavement

- Adults assume that because adolescents have ability to think rationally they need no further explanations.
- They assume since adolescents often less amenable to adult guidance, they do not need support.
- In reality, adolescents do, but often left unsupported.
- Parents often rely on adolescent children to provide comfort and take on adult responsibilities.
Cumulative loss

- Cumulative losses are neither protective nor desensitizing – children don’t get “used to” death of peers
- Students may come to learn adults are unable to establish a safe environment and unprepared to provide assistance
- They may conclude there is little value in seeking such assistance and may appear to show no reactions after a death
- They may turn to peers for support or engage in risky behaviors because they are fearful of their own mortality
Provide advice on how to support child

- Funeral attendance
- Be aware of community resources and offer them to families
- Provide follow-up – remember that grieving is long-term
Helpful responses to a grief trigger

- Provide a safe space or an adult the student can talk to
- Set procedures for the student to obtain support
- Let the student call a parent or family member if necessary
- Provide permission and encouragement to see school nurse or counselor
- Offer private time to talk about feelings
Importance of professional self-care

• Recognize it is distressing to be with children who are in distress

• It’s critical staff find ways to have their own personal needs met and appreciate and address impact of supporting children who are grieving or traumatized

• Create a culture where:
  – it is ok to be upset
  – members normalize asking for help and model willingness to accept assistance
National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement

Initial Funding: September 11th Children’s Fund & National Philanthropic Trust; Current support: New York Life Foundation

• Promote appreciation of role schools can serve to support students, staff, and families at times of crisis and loss
• Enhance training in professional education programs
• Serve as resource for information, training materials, consultation and technical assistance – provided at no charge to schools

• www.schoolcrisiscenter.org
Coalition to Support Grieving Students

- American Federation of School Administrators (AFSA)
- American Federation of Teachers (AFT)
- American School Counselors Association (ASCA)
- National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)
- National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)
- National Association of School Nurses (NASN)
- National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)
- National Education Association (NEA)
- School Social Workers Association of America (SSWAA)
- School Superintendents Association (AASA)
www.grievingstudents.org
Modules Placed into Six Sections

• Each section contains 2-4 video modules; each video is accompanied by handout that summarizes major points
• Conversation and Support
• Developmental and Cultural Considerations
• Practical Considerations
• Reactions and Triggers
• Professional Preparation and Self-Care
• Crisis and Other Special Circumstances
Additional Resources

• Guidance Documents
  – Practical guidelines developed by the NCSCB on how to respond to the death of a student or staff

• Parent booklet: *After a Loved One dies – How Children Grieve and How to Support Them*

• Articles

• Online Resources
  – Achildingrief.com
For further information

Toll Free: 877-53-NCSCB (877-536-2722)
www.schoolcrisiscenter.org
www.aap.org/disasters/adjustment
Gortimer Gibbons’ Life on Normal Street

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jikz6c84O-Q