

Dealing With Grief in the Classroom



Nothing that grieves us can be called little; by the external laws of proportion a child's loss of a doll and a king's loss of a crown are events of the same size. Mark Twain, *Which was the Dream?* (1897)

When a person is born we rejoice, and when they're married we jubilate, but when they die we try to pretend nothing has happened.- Margaret Mead

“Tears are the silent language of grief” *Voltaire*

“I am convinced that the greatest sorrow of all sorrows is to feel alone, to feel unwanted, deprived of all affection. It consists in not having anyone.... May we all be instruments of peace, of love, and of compassion.” *Mother Teresa*

Dealing With Grief in the Classroom

How a person copes with loss is almost as unique as one's fingerprint. The response to the death or separation of a family member, relative, or close friend will affect the physical, psychological, and spiritual components of the life of the person suffering the loss. Coping with this event is called the grieving process.

The actions of those working with someone who has suffered a loss is almost as unique.

The stages of mourning are universal and are experienced by people from all walks of life. Mourning occurs in response to an individual's own terminal illness or to the death of a valued being, human or animal. There are five stages of normal grief. They were first proposed by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her 1969 book "On Death and Dying".

1. Denial and Isolation
2. Anger
3. Bargaining
4. Depression
5. Acceptance

Carl Hammerschlag, a Yale-trained psychiatrist, spent twenty years with Native Americans in the Southwest of the United States. While working as a family physician he was introduced to a patient named Santiago, a Pueblo priest and clan chief, who believed there were many ways for one to heal. In his book, *The Dancing Healers* (1988), Hammerschlag shares a time when Santiago asked him where he had learned how to heal. Hammerschlag rattled off his medical education, internship, and certification. The old man replied, "Do you know how to dance?" "You must be able to dance if you are to heal people," and then stated, "I can teach you my steps, but you will have to hear your own music"

Grief counseling is metaphorically, learning to dance. Each person looks at the world through a different set of lenses, and as a result, one's dances, steps, upbringing, hopes, dreams, and healing are dependent on many factors. It is about sharing a person's journey before or after a death. The focus is on companioning others during difficult times and not rescuing or fixing them, and about listening to their stories and thoughts with an open mind and open heart.

Dealing With Grief in the Classroom

To effectively deal with grief in the classroom, a teacher should explore and gain more knowledge in the following areas.

1. Types of Losses
2. Who Is Most Affected
3. Things That Are Good To Know
4. What You, The Teacher, Can Do As A Caregiver

STATISTICS:

WHY SHOULD YOU SEE ALL THE FOLLOWING STATISTICS?

STATISTICALLY SPEAKING...

The odds are not in your favor of enjoying a career in education without being confronted with the divorce or death in the lives of one or more your students; **Or the aftershock!**

FAMILY TYPES

Traditional
Single Parent Due To Divorce, Death, Abandonment Or Mother Never Married
Step Family
Blended Family
Foster Family/ Includes living with a Guardian/Grandparent

Most children will suffer loss through a life altering crisis including death of a parent, divorce or separation issues.

The Two Primary Types Of Loss Are:

1. Divorce/Separation
2. Death

Dealing With Grief in the Classroom - Divorce

DIVORCE:

WHO IS AFFECTED? Not seen as terminal by others. Normally affects only one, or a chosen few students.

REMINDER: Parents Get Divorces; Children Don't!

Divorce Statistics (*The State of America's Children, 1998 Yearbook, Children's Defense Fund*)

- 1 in 2 will live in a single parent family at some point in childhood
- 1 in 3 is born to unmarried parents
- 1 in 4 lives with only one parent
- 1 in 8 is born to a teenage mother
- 1 in 25 lives with neither parent

Current Family Statistics - 2003

- 68.7% of American Youth are living in non-traditional families
- 23.3% living with biological mother (*Step-family Association*)
- 4.4% living with biological father (*Step-family Association*)
- 1% Foster Families (*U.S. Census Bureau*)
- 3.7% living with non-relatives (*U.S. Census Bureau*)
- 6.3% living with grandparents (*AARP - U.S. Census Bureau*)
- 30% living with step-family or a cohabiting couple (*Step-family Association*)

(Note: This does not include youth impacted by the death of a loved person such as a sibling or grandparent.)

Custodial / Non-Custodial Statistics

Children of divorced parents are seven times more likely to suffer from depression in adult life than people of similar age and background whose parents have not divorced.

Approximately 30% of U.S. families are now being headed by a single parent, and in 80% of those families, the mother is the sole parent. The United States is the world's leader in fatherless families. Father absence contributes to crime and delinquency. Violent criminals are overwhelmingly males who grew up without fathers.

75% of teenage pregnancies are adolescents from single parent homes

An Israeli study, indicated that the loss of a parent through divorce is more likely to cause depression than loss through death. "The earlier the separation occurred, the more likely it was to have had an influence," researcher Bernard Lerer said. (*Molecular Psychiatry, 1999*)

BEHAVIOR STATISTICS

75% of children/adolescents in chemical dependency hospitals are from single-parent families.
(*Center for Disease Control, Atlanta, GA*)

1 out of 5 children have a learning, emotional, or behavioral problem due to the family system changing.
(*National Center for Health Statistics*)

More than one half of all youths incarcerated for criminal acts lived in one-parent families when they were children. (*Children's Defense Fund*)

63% of suicides are individuals from single parent families

Dealing With Grief in the Classroom - Divorce

Impact On Learning : Grief Speaks To Us Through:

- addictions
- bullying
- cutting and other self injurious behaviors
- depression
- violence
- rage
- fatigue
- headaches
- irritability
- acting out behavior
- anxiety
- eating disorders
- fights
- isolation
- learning difficulties
- post traumatic stress disorder
- perfectionism
- abuse
- bullying
- suicide
- homicide

Impact On Learning : A Student May React To A Loss By Exhibiting...

1. A decline in school performance
2. Difficulty in mastering new material
3. Irritable, withdrawn, anxious or depressed behavior.
4. A likelihood in risk-taking behaviors from drug abuse, to attempts at suicide.

What You Can Do As A Teacher

1. Routine Is Important! During this time of crisis and uncertainty, students often find a sense of comfort in a familiar classroom with a familiar routine.
2. Get as much detailed information as possible concerning whom you should contact for questions and concerns, the child's living arrangements, etc.
3. Stay in regular contact with the student suffering from the loss. Be on the alert for personality or behavioral changes. Know the support system that is available in the school. **BE A GOOD LISTENER!**
4. Provide different avenues in getting required work from the student. If there is no support at home, you might have to resort to providing an extra study hall, etc. These decisions should be made with the knowledge and support of the school counselor.

HOWEVER...

Do not presume anything! As strange as it may sound, the child may actually feel relieved about the divorce, and you will see improvement, academically and socially.

But this is more likely to be the exception than the rule!

Dealing With Grief in the Classroom - Death

DEATH:

WHO IS AFFECTED?

Unlike Divorce, death is terminal ! Depending on the person and circumstances of the death, can possibly have an effect on the teacher as well as every member of the classroom, or the entire school.

STATISTICS

1.2 million children will lose a parent to death before age 15.

Almost 40% will experience the death of a peer

20% will have witnessed a death

Mortality rates for adults in their 40s and 50s in the past two decades have risen dramatically making it more likely that younger children will experience the death of a parent, or a classmate's parent.

After losing a parent, 85% of children exhibit such symptoms as difficulty sleeping, angry outbursts, worry, depression, bed-wetting, and thumb-sucking. After a year, more regressive behaviors may fade, but other problems, such as lack of confidence and preoccupation with illness, are likely to continue.

IT'S IMPORTANT TO KNOW...

Some Factors That Determine The Reaction To A Loss Can Depend On:

- How the person most connected to the loss is reacting to that loss.
- The relationship between members of the classroom and the person experiencing the loss.
- The teacher's personal feelings about death (based on cultural, religious and other background)
- The teacher's comfort level in dealing with the topic.
- How close the teacher was to the person who has died.
- How close the members of the classroom was to the person who has died.
- The circumstances surrounding the death.

IT'S IMPORTANT TO KNOW...

YOUR OWN FEELINGS regarding significant losses such as death and divorce. How the trusted caregiver responds to the affected person's loss does have an effect on how he/she will react to the loss.

Sometimes adults don't want to talk about the death, assuming that by doing so, young people will be spared some of the pain and sadness. However, the reality is very simple: teens grieve anyway.

Teens often need caring adults to confirm that it's all right to be sad and to feel a multitude of emotions when someone they love leaves or dies. When ignored, teens may suffer more from feeling isolated than from the actual death itself. Worse yet, they feel all alone in their grief.

Dealing With Grief in the Classroom - Death

IT'S IMPORTANT TO KNOW...

The more you know about your own feelings, fears and biases concerning a loss, whether it be a divorce/separation of parents, the death of a pet, family member or friend, while at the same time dealing with your personal feeling about the importance of school work getting completed, the better you will be prepared to be an effective caregiver.

Be aware! This balance is not always easily attainable.

IT'S IMPORTANT TO KNOW...

- Your School's Grieving Plan (*pre-plan and day of crisis, who is in charge, etc.*)
- Your Classroom Policy - Is it flexible
- What To Do When You Receive News Dealing With A Loss In Your Classroom

What To Do In The Event Of Death Of A Family Pet

1. Verify the information with the affected student.
2. If there are no objections from the student, share the information with the class.
3. If needed, help the student deal with difficult feelings by offering your time for a one-on-one session, or the services of the school counselor. Establish procedure for leaving the classroom, or completing homework. Keeping a routine for the student is important.

What To Do In The Event Of Death Of A Family Member

1. It is extremely important that someone from the school contact and verify factual information with the family, and what information the family wants to be disclosed.
2. Once the information has been obtained, notify affected staff members.
3. Provide students with the facts you have been given, and any answer questions.
4. If needed, help students deal with difficult feelings by providing counseling and support for distressed students. Establish procedure for leaving the classroom (ex. should a pass be required, assignments, etc..)

Dealing With Grief in the Classroom - Death

What To Do In The Event Of Death Of A Student or Staff Member

1. Again, of extreme importance, someone from the school should contact and verify factual information with the family, and what information the family wants to be disclosed.
2. Once the information has been verified, notify the School Crisis Team and implement the Grief Counseling Plan. If there is none, develop a plan.
3. Notify Teachers and Staff First.
4. Notify Students Face-to-Face with Familiar Staff.
5. Identify students considered to be at-risk for mental distress.
6. Establish Crisis and Grief Counseling and Support Services At School

What To Do In The Event Of Death Of A Student By Suicide

1. Once again, someone from the school should contact and verify factual information with the family, and what information the family wants to be disclosed.
2. Once the information has been verified, notify the School Crisis Team and implement the Grief Counseling Plan. If there is none, develop a plan.
3. Notify teachers and staff first, then students face-to-face with familiar staff
4. Acknowledge the individual who died. However, do not glamorize the suicide.
5. Identify students considered to be at-risk for mental distress.
6. Establish Crisis and Grief Counseling and Support Services At School
7. Minimize media coverage

Guidelines For Identifying Students Who Might Be High Risk of Emotional Distress

- The relationship between members of the classroom and the person experiencing the loss.
- How close the members of the classroom was to the person who has died.
- **The circumstances surrounding the death. ex. illness, suicide after bullying, accident.**
- Students with troubled or strained relationship with the person experiencing the loss.
- Students with a history of prior losses or emotional difficulties.

IMPORTANT:

The reaction of the person(s) most affected the loss will play a major role in how others will react.

(See Impact On Learning pp.4-5)

Dealing With Grief in the Classroom - Death

What You Can Do As A Teacher

1. Routine Is Important! During this time of crisis and uncertainty, students often find a sense of comfort in a familiar classroom with a familiar routine.
2. If permitted, talk about the crisis event, either one-on-one, or to the entire class. Provide time for the students to describe their feelings. Listen to what students want to share. This, along with encouraging them to journal, etc. to express their pain of loss can be a powerful healing force. BE A GOOD LISTENER!
3. Protect them from becoming re-traumatized. Monitor behaviors and reactions that may trigger a certain response from the affected student(s).
4. Provide different avenues in getting required work from the student. If there is no support at home, you might have to resort to providing an extra study hall, etc. These decisions should be made with the knowledge and support of the school counselor.
5. Stay in regular contact with students who are suffering from the loss. Be on the alert for personality or behavioral changes. Know the support system that is available in the school. Involve other staff members, school counselor and, possibly, the school psychologist.
6. Teach students about understanding their own behavior and learning new ways of coping with a loss. There is not one method or approach. Each caregiver should use techniques that he or she finds to be effective.

HOWEVER...

Do not presume anything! The effects of a loss may be quite different for each child, even in the same family!

REMEMBER...

How a person copes with loss is almost as unique as one's fingerprint.

The actions of those working with someone who has suffered a loss is almost as unique.

In Conclusion,

I Feel Safe In Saying That Grief Counseling Is Indeed,

“Learning How To Dance, Once You Hear The Right Music”

But, During A Time Of Crisis, One Thing Is For Certain...

We All Need Somebody To Lean On!