

Talking With Children

Take-Home Message

Making contact and talking with grieving students helps them cope with their loss. But some teachers aren't sure what to say. They're afraid they'll cause the child more pain. It's important to remember that a student's grief and pain are caused by the death or loss, not by talking about it.

This handout provides practical suggestions to school professionals on how to initiate a conversation with a student who has recently experienced the death of a close family member or friend.

Why It's Vital to Speak Up

School personnel are often concerned about the possibility that they will upset children by raising the topic of death. They may worry that they will make matters worse. They may choose to say nothing.

Saying nothing actually communicates a great deal to children. It tells them that you may be:

- *Insensitive.* You don't realize they are confused and struggling.
- *Uncaring.* You don't care about this important event in their lives.
- *Incapable.* You don't believe you are capable of providing the support they need.
- *Unconfident.* You feel the child is unable to adjust and cope even with your assistance.
- *Unapproving.* You believe it is wrong to talk about death.

No one wants to communicate these messages to grieving children.

Speaking up lets grieving children know you recognize their situation and want to be supportive.



What Children Are Often Thinking

Children learn from an early age that conversations about death make people uncomfortable. If they ask questions, people may look away or not continue the conversation. If they speak to grieving family members after a death, adults may cry or show distress. Children sometimes conclude they have done something wrong and avoid raising the subject again. They may hold in their feelings as a way to support their family. They may try to look fine and reassure family they are okay when they really need support.

School professionals can play a powerful role in reaching out to students, acknowledging their loss, and offering to speak with them and answer their questions. Staff who already have a trusting and genuine relationship with the grieving student are in the best position to offer this support.

Initiating the Conversation

These steps can help get the conversation started.

1. *Express concern.* Let students know you've heard about their loss and are available to listen and offer support.
2. *Be genuine.* Children can tell when adults are authentic in their communications. For example, don't tell a child you will miss her uncle if you did not know the man. Do tell the child you are sad she has experienced this loss.
3. *Invite the conversation.* Use simple, direct, open-ended questions. For example, ask, "How are you and your family doing?"
4. *Listen and observe.* Listen more and talk less. Share observations about students' behavior or responses in a nonjudgmental manner.
5. *Limit personal sharing.* You can draw on personal experiences to help you better understand students, but do not need to share this with them. Keep the focus on the student.
6. *Offer practical advice.* For example, discuss ways to respond to questions from peers or adults about the death.
7. *Offer reassurance.* Without minimizing their concerns, let students know that over time they will be better able to cope with their distress, and that you will be there to help them.
8. *Maintain contact.* At first, children may not accept your invitation to talk or offers of support. Their questions will evolve over time. Remain accessible, concerned, and connected.

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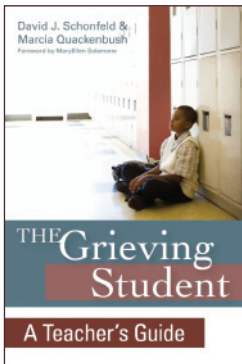
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What to Expect

You may experience feelings of your own when you talk with students about the death of a loved one. Students usually appreciate concerned adults showing they are touched by the event and/or how the student is feeling, such as by the adult appearing sad or becoming tearful for a moment. Students can learn more about coping strategies when they see competent adults showing some distress and modeling effective coping.

Even when teachers follow all of these guidelines, some students may still be reluctant to talk about the death. They may not fully understand it. They may feel overwhelmed by the experience and their strong feelings. They may worry that they will lose control, or feel ashamed of these deep emotions. They may have complicated feelings, such as guilt or shame.

Offer a private setting in the school for the conversation. Remain available and present over time. Offer other outlets within the school for support (another teacher, a school counselor, school psychologist, school social worker, or a school nurse). Help them think of other options in their family and community as well.



For more information on supporting grieving students, refer to *The Grieving Student: A Teacher's Guide* by David Schonfeld and Marcia Quackenbush.

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