

Bullying of Bereaved Students

When H. was in grade 5 and his younger sister was diagnosed with cancer, children at school started bullying him and said that he was getting special treatment. After his sister's death, several students continued to harass him and made comments about him being the teacher's pet because his sibling died.

A Senior Kindergarten student had to somehow cope with a classmate repeatedly saying, "you're lying, your daddy isn't dead."

A pre-teen endured obscene remarks about what he should do to his dad's dead body.

"Why don't you go kill yourself like your mom?" was whispered more than once, to an 8-year-old when she was outside at recess.

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ARE YOU SURPRISED OR SHOCKED BY THESE STORIES?

Unfortunately, these devastating and alarming accounts of the bullying of bereaved children are tragically commonplace. At Lighthouse for Grieving Children and Families, we have been supporting and companionship grieving children, teens, and their families for over 20 years. We listen and hold whatever is shared without reaction or judgment. However, it has become increasingly difficult to not react with alarm when participants share their stories of the cruel harassment and bullying they face from other students and teammates.

Lighthouse offers facilitated, trauma-informed, peer support groups for children and youth, ages 3-19, and their parents/caregivers. These services are free of charge. In company with other bereaved children or youth, feelings of isolation are reduced, or dissipate completely, as participants' thoughts, feelings, and stories are shared with other group members who truly understand. A component of the Lighthouse vision is to create a community of caring so that grief support can be provided wherever it is needed. This is the grief support that teachers,

and all school personnel, can provide to grieving students including those being bullied.

Educators may not be aware that bereaved children and youth are at risk for higher levels of social withdrawal, anxiety, sadness, fear, and depression, as well as lower levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, happiness, and school achievement (LaFreniere & Cain, 2015). Although there is currently limited qualitative research on the topic of the bullying of bereaved children and youth, there is little doubt of the detrimental weight it adds to those already facing the profound emotions and difficulties mentioned above. When supporting grieving youth and children who may be dealing with any number of challenges, it is important to understand that each person will have individual reactions, responses, and methods to process their grief, and will find different coping mechanisms that work best for them. At Lighthouse we recommend that adults, as well as peers, never assume they know what the griever needs or requires, and instead ask them what would be most helpful. Providing choices in the type of support offered to, and decided upon by the bereaved student, can help them regain a sense of control in their life at a time when they feel that everything is beyond their control.

Although each student's grief is unique, there are four common types of taunting that bereaved students face (LaFreniere & Cain, 2012). Listed below are the types of bullying behaviours directed towards grieving children, followed by qualitative examples shared from Lighthouse participants:

1. Negative comparisons with taunter's own family -

"You don't have a mom anymore and we do!"; "My dad is coming to my hockey game, too bad your dad can't."

2. Derogation of deceased (Sometimes including

other members of the family) - "Your sister killed herself* because she was dumb, just like you."

3. Active rejection - "You can't play with me anymore, cause your mom died." "You are weird now, go away!"

4. Making fun of the bereaved child's grief or mode of coping With the Loss - "If you were really sad you would have cried longer than 2 hours." "Why do you keep that picture of your dad in your desk? Are you a baby?"

(*preferred terminology to use for suicide- death/died by suicide, ended their own life, or suicided, not committed suicide.)