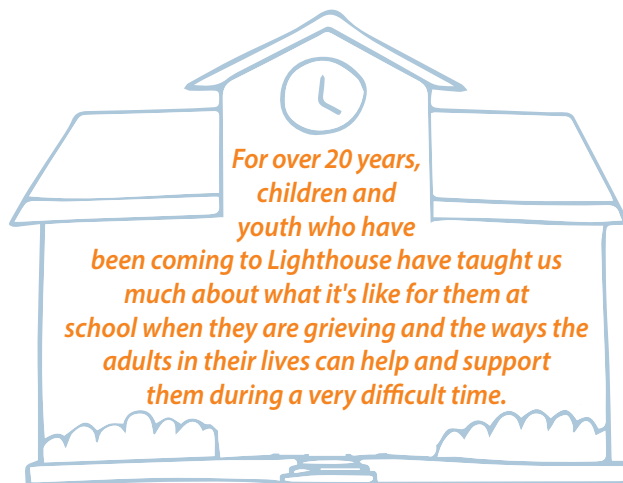


For children and youth who have experienced a life-changing death loss, school may be an important haven of supportive adults and friends that provides them the opportunity to resume routines, extracurricular activities, and socialization with peers at a time when everything in their life has changed. Some grieving children are eager to return to school after someone has died and there are many ways that teachers, counsellors, administrators and others within the school community, can provide support to students who are dealing with a death.



SIGNS OF A GRIEVING STUDENT

Grief and our responses to it are as unique as we are. For students returning to school after someone has died, expect a range of responses from seemingly no response at all to noticeable changes in academic performance and behavior. Below are some common responses children and teens have shared with us.

Emotional: There are a multitude of factors that affect the emotions kids and teens experience when they are grieving. Some factors include thoughts about the deceased person, the circumstances surrounding the death, as well as the many changes that are occurring in their lives. Common emotions include: sadness, anger, guilt, fear, anxiety, sorrow, relief. Because grief feelings can come in waves and be triggered by sights, sounds, smells, holidays and many other experiences, children and youth are likely to have good days and bad days as a normal part of their grieving.

Physical: Children and youth frequently share that they feel grief in their bodies. This includes headaches, stomach aches, lethargy, hyperactivity, feeling easily startled, unexpected crying, and other various aches and pains.

Social: Children and youth returning to school frequently share how their relationships with their peers have changed. The death of a family member or friend changes not only the child's family situation but often their world view. Children and youth recognize that they are now very different from their peers who, as much as they may try to understand, can't understand their experience unless they have experienced it too. This can leave kids feeling different and sometimes affects friendships. Some children have even shared that they have experienced bullying at school because they have a parent or sibling who has died.

Behavioural: Because we all grieve differently, expect a range of responses as children and youth cope with their grief. There are children who want to talk about the death and how they are feeling and some who do not. Some may appear to lack energy, be more quiet or withdrawn. Others will deal with intense feelings and emotions in physical ways and may display more aggressive behaviour, have difficulty sitting still, or may be less compliant. Sometimes these children can be misdiagnosed with ADHD. Some could engage in risk-taking behaviours, unsafe physical activities, substance abuse, or even illegal activities. Others may take on adult roles, become extra helpful, or focus intensely on school performance.

Academic: When returning to school after someone has died, many children and youth share that focusing on school work is a challenge. They often feel distracted as they deal with the many thoughts and emotions they are having. Some children struggle with feelings of anxiety when separating from family members and may have a decline in attendance. Youth may not see the point of going to school when their thoughts are invaded by death and dying. Even the most capable students find their focus and concentration drops while they are grieving and for youth who are in their final years of school, the stress to perform and maintain their marks can feel overwhelming.

WAYS TEACHERS AND SCHOOL STAFF CAN HELP

Reach out to the family before the student returns to school. If possible, meet with the child and family before they return to school. Children and youth frequently share that they would have liked to have been asked what they want shared with the school community and how they would like that shared. Although communicating honest and truthful information at an age appropriate level is always best, it is important to honour what kids and families want.

Make a support plan to help the student during difficult times of the day. For many kids, just knowing that they have an option “out” of the classroom when they are feeling overwhelmed can help ease the stress of coping with school. Help them by making a support plan for managing school work and emotionally difficult days. A ‘safe room’ where the child can go allows time and space to cope with difficult emotions. Talking about the student’s loss as a class or with their friend group can begin to foster a compassionate peer community.

Acknowledge the death and the range of feelings and emotions that accompany grief. Kids and youth need adults in their lives to connect with who will provide support, acknowledgement and opportunities to share their grief feelings, experiences and to talk about the person who died.

Provide opportunities for children and teens to express their feelings and emotions. Sometimes the feelings and emotions that kids are experiencing are too great to allow them to focus on school tasks. Allowing and providing opportunities for expression of emotions such as drawing pictures, talking, journaling, or physical movement helps them get the feelings out.

Listen. Kids and youth can teach us a lot about the support they need if we take the time to listen and acknowledge their feelings. As much as we want to relieve their pain, we can’t “fix” what has happened. Adults need to listen actively without judgment or advice and help to normalize their feelings.

Be flexible. As much as returning to the predictability of school routines can be helpful to grieving children and youth, it is also important to be flexible with timelines and quantity of work expected. Modifying assignments, providing quiet work spaces, adjusting timelines or substituting an academic activity with journaling, expressive art or other activity can help.

Recognize that our communities are diverse. Grief may look different among different cultures and within different families from the way it is experienced to the way it is expressed. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Taking a culturally humble approach and allowing a child or teen to teach you about how you can best help and support them allows them choices and allows you to learn how you can best offer support that is meaningful.

Be aware of and sensitive to grief triggers. It’s important to recognize that for grieving children and youth, grief will be triggered with each developmental stage, during holidays, milestones, life changes and major transitions. We don’t “get over” grief, the feelings reoccur throughout our lives. Being sensitive to what grieving children are feeling during holidays, mother’s day, father’s day, prom or graduation can help them get through the ongoing challenges related to their loss. Ensure that supply teachers are provided with information about students in class who are grieving, especially if a class activity will center around a special holiday. Ensuring that information relating to the student’s loss is passed along as the child or youth moves to another class or school will also help to provide awareness to subsequent teachers.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Companioning the Grieving Child:

A Soulful Guide For Caregivers by Alan D. Wolfelt, PH.D

Healing a Child’s Grieving Heart:

100 Practical Ideas For Families, Friends and Caregivers by Alan D. Wolfelt, PH. D

Healing a Teen’s Grieving Heart:

100 Practical Ideas For Families, Friends and Caregivers by Alan D. Wolfelt, PH.D