Hello,

As a part of its pursuit to become a holistic hub for the children of Berks County, Olivet Boys and Girls Club has established Luci’s Light, an Initiative for Grieving Families, as a special repository of resources for students in the wake of the tragic loss of a guardian or close relative. Having lost my mother when I was thirteen and felt the dramatic emotional and educational ramifications, I know just how critical a coordinated community response to such a death is to the development of the bereaved child. In fact, one in twenty children will experience the death of a parent/guardian by the time they turn sixteen.

With that in mind, Luci’s Light provides direct support to the child and their family, including access to free mental health services provided by the BCIU, grocery store gift cards to alleviate the burden on the widow/widower, hot meals delivered to the family in the week after the passing, and free Olivet membership for the children of the deceased. All of these resources are available on our website at olivetbgc.org under the “Support for Grieving Families” tab, where school staff can reach out on behalf of the student and their family.

Further, the initiative also provides material to school districts, including this resource packet, to help create a uniform response to such grief at each school. In the following pages, you will find module summaries from the Coalition to Support Grieving Students. These modules can serve as the foundation for your school’s action plan, providing insight on how to coordinate a response to a student losing a guardian or close relative. They can also be accessed online at grievingstudents.org.

I sincerely hope that you find the enclosed material useful, and that you take advantage of the resources made available to your students by the Olivet Boys and Girls Club and its compassionate community partners.

Best,
Andrew Thomas
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Professional Preparation

Take-Home Message

Professional development addressing support for grieving students is an essential component of training for teachers and other school staff. Unfortunately, it is offered far less often than needed. Most school professionals want to receive such training. There are resources to help make effective professional development possible.

Bereavement Will Affect Most Students

Approximately 5% of children nationwide will experience the death of a parent by the time they reach age 16. About 90% of all students will experience the death of someone close to them by the time they complete high school. It is likely there is at least one grieving student in every classroom, in every school, every day.

Bereavement has a profound impact on learning, development, and the emotional adjustment of children. The unique role schools can play in supporting grieving students is powerful. It is important to provide training in this area for school professionals. Ideally, introductory training would be provided at the preservice level, and continuing opportunities for learning would be offered for experienced teachers and school staff.

School Professionals Want Training

Many teachers and other school professionals feel unprepared and apprehensive about reaching out to provide support to grieving students. They worry that they will say or do something clumsy or wrong, make matters worse, or start a conversation they don’t know how to finish.

A survey examining this issue was conducted in October 2012 by the American Federation of Teachers, the New York Life Foundation, Tiller Inc., and Hart Research Associates. It involved more than 1,200 members of the American Federation of Teachers.

Respondents recognized that bereavement is common in the lives of children and that students have a wide range of problems and challenges after experiencing a significant loss. Teachers reported that they wanted to provide support and assistance to their students when they were affected by a death. They recognized the unique role they can play in these situations.

But the single most important barrier preventing them from providing this support was insufficient training and/or professional development. An overwhelming majority of teachers—93%—reported they had never received any training about supporting grieving students. Only 3% of schools or districts reported offering such training.

Schools Can Meet the Challenge

Schools can help meet this gap by ensuring that in-service training addresses the topic of children and grief. This should be offered as a component of ongoing professional development in relevant school professions. The benefits of such training are considerable. This training can:

• Provide school personnel with the information and skills necessary to support grieving children and their families.

• Establish norms about what school professionals can and should do to support grieving students.

• Deliver a clear message that supporting grieving students is important.

• Emphasize the importance of school professionals in providing this support, and establish that these are valued skills for them to acquire.

• Demonstrate that the school administration is sensitive to teachers’ needs in this area and committed to providing support to assist them in their efforts.

It is best to plan and offer training prior to a school incident or crisis so that school staff will be better able to respond.
Professional Preparation

There Are Resources to Help
Schools can collaborate with professionals, agencies, and organizations in the community that provide bereavement support. This might include agencies such as a children’s bereavement center, a hospice program, or a mental health agency. These groups can serve as referral resources and may also be able to offer direct services at the school—perhaps bereavement peer support groups or individual counseling with students.

They may also be able to assist with ongoing consultation and training. School-based health, mental health, and counseling staff can also be asked to provide training to educators in their own school or district.

Often these trainings are planned and provided in the aftermath of a school crisis or school-wide bereavement. While this is generally better than offering no training at all, “just in time” trainings usually are not actually in time. When school staff is personally affected by a situation—they knew the individual who died, they are close to bereaved students—it is more difficult to consider the topic, incorporate the information, and learn the relevant skills.

Look to the Coalition to Support Grieving Students
The Coalition to Support Grieving Students can provide the spark for targeted discussions among school staff. There are abundant resources available to form a foundation for more structured presentations. There are materials that can facilitate self-directed or small-group professional development. The website houses other resources that can be useful in training or personal education.

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

LEAD FOUNDING MEMBERS

FOUNDING MEMBERS
Coordinating Services and Supporting Transitions

Take-Home Message

Grieving students interact with a large number of school personnel. Ideally, all of these professionals will function as a team that coordinates services. It is critical that representatives from this group maintain effective communication with the student and the family. The team can offer information and status updates, answer questions, provide referrals, and support grieving students over time and during periods of transition.

Functioning as a Team

Grieving students are likely to interact with many different school professionals every day. These include educators, administrators, and support staff. Each has the potential to offer valuable assistance to students. Other school personnel may also be available, such as school counselors, school nurses, school psychologists, and school social workers.

Each provider brings different perspectives and unique insights about the student’s experience. Working together, they can identify strategies most likely to be helpful for students. It is important the group function as a team, communicating together often and coordinating services. It is critical that they maintain frequent, effective contact with the student and the family.

The team can offer the family information, status updates, answers to questions, and responses to concerns. They can provide referrals where appropriate and partner with the family to coordinate support strategies between school and home.

Choosing a Primary Contact

It is often helpful to establish one (or a few) primary points of contact for student and family. Families may feel overwhelmed if they are being regularly updated by many school staff members, especially if they have more than one child in the school system. Students may find many update meetings burdensome. They may not wish to discuss the impact of their loss with multiple adults at the school on a regular basis.

Ideal primary contacts might be a team member who already has a special relationship with the student or one who has a greater level of comfort or experience supporting grieving students and families. The main contact for the parent or caregiver may be the same individual, or someone different.

It is important to ensure that there is at least one point of contact for every student who has experienced a significant loss. This contact should be clearly and expressly identified by the team so there isn’t a mistaken assumption that “someone else is taking care of this.”

Each Member’s Unique Role

While one person may take on the role of primary contact with the student and family, this doesn’t mean that all responsibility for support is delegated to that person. Each member of the team can take on a unique role, depending on the student’s and family’s needs.

For example, the English teacher might support the student with organizational skills and planning for the transition back to school. The math teacher might monitor and help balance the student’s cumulative workload across various subjects. The school counselor might meet with the family to discuss how the student and family are coping. An administrator may check school records and databases to be sure future letters or report cards are not addressed to a parent who died.

Support During Transitions

Transitions between schools—and even between grades—can be both exciting and stressful for all students. There may be a change in teachers, routines, rules, schedules, and peer groups. The academic curriculum may be more demanding.

For grieving students, these stressors can be more severe. They are particularly vulnerable at times of transition. The person who died may have been someone who provided valuable guidance or support at such times—a sister who offered advice on navigating a new social network, a dad who was there to listen with compassion when changes felt overwhelming. Feelings of grief and loss may be accentuated.
The school team can help grieving students during transitions between grades in the same school, or during promotions to other schools. With the student’s knowledge and the family’s permission, school professionals can communicate the student’s needs and describe strategies that have been effective in providing support.

When a student is changing grades or classrooms in the same school, the information can be shared with the new teachers. The team can explore ways to provide some constancy in the support the student receives. Perhaps the student will continue to meet regularly with a school counselor, be invited to check in with a favorite teacher, or continue to receive additional support from the coach.

For transition to a new school, it will be helpful for the team to share information with teachers, administrators, counseling staff, and school health personnel. Parents may not realize that this information is not automatically shared with a new school. The school team can also help the family identify ways to prepare the new school to best support their child. In some cases, students may benefit from meeting with the new team before the start of the new year to discuss options for ongoing support.

**Older Students: Special Concerns for High School Juniors and Seniors**

High school juniors and seniors may be especially challenged by the death of a family member or close friend. They are coping with heightened academic demands and scrutiny. Difficulties concentrating and learning that are common in bereavement may seem to carry major implications for their future success.

Students who are considering upcoming independence from their families—by going to college, embarking on a career, or leaving the family home—are typically ambivalent to some degree. They want separation from their parents, but also worry about how well they can live without their family’s support and comfort.

After a death, students may become more anxious about leaving friends and family behind. They may worry that something will happen to their loved ones, or to themselves, if they don’t remain together. They may feel new obligations about assisting a surviving parent with chores, providing emotional support, or getting a job to help the family financially. A plan to pursue personal goals may feel like a selfish act, or even abandonment.

Delaying independence from the family immediately after a significant death may be the best choice for the student and family in some situations. However, it is important to explore carefully whether this is truly in the best interests of the student and aligns with the student’s personal choice. Involvement of the school counselor or other student support professional may help the family and student explore these options in a careful, balanced way.

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

Take-Home Message
It’s important to offer children a chance to attend funeral or memorial services after the death of a family member or a loved one. Most of the time, it’s better for children if they do attend. School personnel often have a chance to play a vital role in helping families make good choices about children’s participation in services.

Families may ask the school for advice on this matter. Often, school personnel are the only professionals who interact with families before the funeral.

Why School Personnel?
Parents often notify schools immediately after the death of a family member and before the funeral occurs. School personnel may be the only professionals who have the opportunity to provide advice to parents about the benefits of allowing children to participate in the funeral. They can help families understand how to best prepare and support children through the experience.

Parents’ Wishes
Some parents are clear that they want to include their children in the funeral or memorial service of a family member, or support their children in attending the funeral of a friend. Other parents hesitate. They may wish to protect their children from the distress of seeing others expressing grief. They may feel their children are too young to understand or benefit from going to the funeral.

Ideally, children will make their own decisions about funeral attendance. Most of the time, it will be better if they do attend.

Benefits for Children
There are a number of benefits for children who attend funeral or memorial services.

• They feel included and affirmed.
• They are comforted by the support of friends and family. They may also gain support from the family’s spiritual community.
• They learn more about their own grief when they see the different ways people grieve and give and seek support.
• They appreciate participating in an important event or ritual.

Problems may develop when children are not included.

• They may feel hurt, discounted, excluded, or unimportant.
• They often create fantasies that are far more frightening than what actually occurs. They may wonder what could possibly be so awful about the services or what is done to the body of their family member or friend when they are not allowed to be there.

Guidelines for Families
It is important for children to understand beforehand what is likely to occur at the funeral. Teachers can share the following guidelines with families to help them prepare and support children attending services.

• Explain what will happen. In simple terms, describe what the service will be like. For example, talk about where it will be held, who will be there, the sequence of events, and what people might say or do. Will there be laughter? Tears? Stories? Music and singing? Will the casket be present? Will it be an open casket? Will there be a funeral procession or a graveside service?
• Answer questions. Invite children to ask questions at any point over the days leading up to, as well as during and after the service. Check in with children several times over this period.
• Let children decide. Give children choices—to attend the services or not, to participate actively or sit quietly, or to stay for the entire service or part of it. It’s helpful to tell children they can leave the service at any point, or take a break for a short time if they wish.
• Pair an adult with each child. Especially for young children and preteens, find an adult who can stay with the child throughout the service. This adult can answer questions, provide support and comfort, and accompany the child if he or she wishes to leave for a period of time. Ideally, this will be someone known to the child, but not deeply affected by the death.
Advice on Funeral Attendance

A babysitter or neighbor often works well. Teachers can also offer to fulfill this role.

• Allow options. Help children find ways to be present at the service that feel safe and meaningful. Young children might want to play quietly on one side of the room. Teens might want to invite a close friend to sit with them in the family section.

• Offer a role. When the service is for a family member, offer the child an opportunity to play a role in the service. Choose simple options that are a good match for the child’s age and personality. It might be helpful to select music, read a poem, pass out memorial cards, light candles, or perform some other activity. It’s also fine if the child prefers not to participate actively in the service.

• Check in afterward. Ask children what they thought of the service and how they are feeling about it. Find out if they have any questions. Check in periodically over several days. Teachers can also check in with students after they have attended a service.

Attendance of School Personnel

Most families are open to, and appreciative of, members of the school community attending their family member’s funeral. Others may prefer smaller, more private funerals with only family members attending. The first step is to consult with the family about school personnel (and others) attending the funeral and to follow the family’s wishes.

When school personnel attend funerals, they demonstrate to grieving students and their families that the school is caring and concerned. It helps establish school personnel as safe people for students to talk with about thoughts, feelings, and questions as their grief progresses.

Some school personnel worry they will not be “strong,” and will show too much emotion at the funeral. Genuine displays of emotions, such as becoming tearful or displaying sadness, show children that it is okay to express emotions. This models for children that people can experience grief and still cope with these strong feelings.

Just being present communicates a great deal to students. They may be more likely to reach out to these staff members at a future time.

Attendance of Peers

School policies should be developed that facilitate the attendance of interested students and staff at the funeral of someone close to them. If the funeral takes place during school hours, parental permission to attend will be necessary. For young children, it may be most appropriate to ask parents to personally accompany their children to the services.

When the death involves a member of the school community, such as a student or staff member, consideration should be given to hiring substitute teachers and making arrangements for coverage of other personnel. It may be helpful to modify the school schedule so that attendance does not create an academic burden on students. However, students and staff should not feel any obligation to attend the funeral. Acceptable alternative activities can be provided for those who prefer to stay at school.

If many students and staff are likely to attend, it will be important to talk with the family so they can be prepared. Explore the possibilities that will best serve both the grieving family and the school community. The family may be able to arrange visitation hours outside of school time, for example. They may choose to move the services to a larger location.

In some cases, there may not be enough room at the funeral location for all who wish to attend. Schools can plan alternative gestures for interested students and staff. They might gather outside the facility before the service to show their caring and remembrance to the family, or do activities in small groups at the school that allow them to share their thoughts with each other and possibly with the family of the deceased.

We discourage the use of school buildings for funeral services, especially if the body of the deceased will be present. This may establish difficult associations with that space for students and staff in the future. The exception would be schools with religious affiliations that have an on-site place for worship, such as a chapel or temple.
**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.

(Continued)
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.

LEAD FOUNDING MEMBERS

CHILDREN’S HOSPITAL LOS ANGELES
NATIONAL CENTER FOR SCHOOL CRISIS AND BEREAVEMENT
NEW YORK LIFE FOUNDATION

FOUNDING MEMBERS

AASA
NAESP
NASP
NASP
NEA
School Social Work Association of America
What Not to Say

Take-Home Message

Many school professionals worry they may say the wrong thing to grieving students and make matters worse. Understanding what not to say will help you be more confident and effective when you reach out to students. The suggestions can help you support grieving children.

How to Act

Here are some behaviors that will increase children’s comfort, sense of safety, and ability to express themselves.

• Be present and authentic. Keep the focus on the student. Offer supportive statements that honestly reflect both your relationship with the deceased and your sense of the student’s response.
• Listen more, talk less. Keep your own comments brief. Ask open-ended questions to help students discuss their experiences, thoughts, and feelings.
• Avoid trying to “cheer up” students or their families. Grief is painful. Attempts to cheer people up or bring focus to the good things in their lives are likely to communicate that you don’t want to hear students or their families talk about their pain.
• Accept expressions of emotion. Expressions of sadness, anger, selfishness, or confusion are common in grieving children. These are an important part of the process. When children hear they should “toughen up” or “be strong for their families” they are less likely to fully express their feelings of grief.
• Show empathy. Reflect back what you hear students say and the actions you observe. Use compassion. Avoid judgment.
• Step in to stop harmful actions when safety is a concern.

It’s important to let children express their feelings of grief. Sometimes these can be quite dramatic—shouting, crying, kicking the floor. It’s also appropriate to stop behaviors that may be harmful to the children, to others or to property.

What Not to Say

Many common and well-intentioned statements are not helpful to grieving children and their families. Here are some comments to avoid, and suggestions for what to say instead.

Don’t worry if you’ve used these statements in the past. Children are very forgiving as long as they feel valued and supported. They hear our concern more than our exact words.

Don’t Say This | Say This Instead
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“I know just what you’re going through.” You cannot know this. Everyone’s experience of grief is unique. | “Can you tell me more about what this has been like for you?”
“You must be incredibly angry.” It is not helpful to tell people how they are feeling or ought to feel. It is better to ask. People in grief often feel many different things at different times. | “Most people have strong feelings when something like this happens to them. What has this been like for you?”
“This is hard. But it’s important to remember the good things in life, too.” This kind of statement is likely to quiet down true expressions of grief. When people are grieving, it’s important they be allowed to experience and express whatever feelings, memories, or wishes they’re having. | “What kinds of memories do you have about the person who died?”
“At least he’s no longer in pain.” Efforts to “focus on the good things” are more likely to minimize the student or family’s experience (see above). Any statement that begins with the words “at least” should probably be reconsidered. | “What sorts of things have you been thinking about since your loved one died?”

What Not to Say

| “I lost both my parents when I was your age.” Avoid comparing your losses with those of students or their families. These types of statements may leave children feeling that their loss is not as profound or important. | “Tell me more about what this has been like for you.” |
| “You’ll need to be strong now for your family. It’s important to get a grip on your feelings.” Grieving children are often told they shouldn’t express their feelings. This holds children back from expressing their grief and learning to cope with these difficult feelings. | “How is your family doing? What kinds of concerns do you have about them?” |
| “My dog died last week. I know how you must be feeling.” It is not useful to compare losses. Keep the focus on grieving children and their families. | “I know how I’ve felt when someone I loved died, but I don’t really know how you’re feeling. Can you tell me something about what this has been like for you?” |

Expect a Range of Responses

The most important thing you can do is simply be with students while they are grieving. Witness their distress. Listen to what they have to say. Tolerate silence when they’re not ready to speak.

Suspend judgment about how students “should” cope with their situations and stay open to the wide range of responses children may have. Let them experience their grief in their own way. Let them know you will be there with them. While it’s important to intervene when you think children may hurt themselves or others, most of the time children are able to express intense feelings without danger.

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

LEAD FOUNDING MEMBERS

- Children’s Hospital Los Angeles
- National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement
- New York Life Foundation

FOUNDING MEMBERS

- AASA, The School Administrators Association
- NAESP, National Association of Elementary School Principals
- NASN, National Association of School Nurses
- NASP, National Association of School Psychologists
- AFT
- NEA, National Education Association
- School Social Work Association of America
Peer Support

Take-Home Message
Children who are uninformed or unprepared may unintentionally isolate or tease a classmate after a death. This can worsen the isolation grieving students already feel.

But children naturally want to help their friends. Teachers can equip their students with the skills to support a peer. This can make a profound difference for a grieving student. There is probably no more important lesson or life skill for an educator to teach.

Grieving Students’ Relationships With Peers
After the death of a close friend or family member, children are likely to experience a range of confusing and strong feelings, including guilt and shame. They may worry that something is wrong with them, or be embarrassed about being associated with a death. They may worry about their appearance, or expressing too much emotion.

They may not know what to say or how to act, even with their friends. They may withdraw from peers.

When a Peer Experiences a Death
Like adults, children often have limited experience supporting a friend who is grieving. They may be afraid to say or do the wrong thing. The death may create uncertainty in their own lives—“Could my father also die?”

They may make insensitive comments, ask repetitive or detailed questions about the death, or even tease the grieving student. They may distance themselves from the grieving student to cope with their own anxieties.

They may want to say, “I worry my father might also die someday. Can you let me know what the experience is like and help me understand it better so I can prepare myself?”

But what they may say instead is, “Your daddy died. You can’t make a Father’s Day card!”

Equip Students With Skills
When teachers take the following steps, students are more likely to provide effective support to a grieving peer.

1. Provide information. Help students understand, at a very basic level, what has happened. They will be less likely to burden a grieving peer in the immediate aftermath of a death with repetitive questions.

2. Give students an opportunity to ask questions. Students are likely to have questions about what death is and the effect it has on children and their families. They will want to know how to be helpful to someone who is grieving. Teachers can often discuss this information with a class before the grieving student returns to school. This helps everyone feel more prepared.

3. Provide a safe environment for students to share thoughts and feelings. Invite students to talk about their own losses or the fears they may have about someone in their own life dying.

4. Offer concrete advice and practical suggestions. For example, talk about ways to start a conversation with someone who is grieving. Discuss helpful things to say, and what not to say.

Most of the advice in Talking With Children and What Not to Say will also be helpful to students.

For more information on supporting grieving students, refer to The Grieving Student: A Teacher’s Guide by David Schonfeld and Marcia Quackenbush.
Take-Home Message

School professionals play a unique role in supporting grieving students both in the immediate aftermath of a loss and over time. Children do not adjust to a major loss in a matter of months or a year, but over a lifetime. The second year after a death is often more difficult than the first. Teachers can play a vital role by offering students ongoing understanding and support that can help them make sense of their experiences and stay productive and positive in their lives.

School Professionals: A Unique Role

When a death occurs in a family, the entire family is grieving. A parent may be preoccupied and less able to manage the details and demands of the family. Children sometimes feel it is better not to burden their parent with additional concerns. A child may feel guilt or shame about the death and find the idea of talking with family overwhelming.

Peers often have limited experience supporting someone who is grieving. Their attempts at support may be awkward. They may pull back because of their own discomfort.

School professionals who are not personally affected by the death in a deep way are often ideal sources of support. They are concerned, accessible, and competent. Students may see them as safer to approach. Often, school professionals are better able to attend to a child’s emotional needs.

School personnel are not expected to provide bereavement counseling to children, but rather to provide bereavement support. They can do this best when they work as a team to meet students’ needs.

Goals of Support

The primary goal is to offer support in the areas most likely to present challenges to students after the death of a family member or friend. Teachers can take steps to:

1. Decrease the sense of isolation. When teachers talk about death in the classroom, both as part of regular coursework and in response to a recent event, all students learn more about how to give and receive support.

2. Increase academic function. It’s common for grieving children to have difficulty concentrating and have a drop in academic performance. Teachers who talk with children and make appropriate adjustments to their class work can help them stay on course academically.

3. Increase the likelihood children will talk with their families. When children experience support and understanding from teachers, they may find it easier to turn to other adults, including their family members, for support.

4. Increase the likelihood children will talk with and receive support from their peers. Through classroom discussions and one-on-one conversations, teachers can model understanding and give all students better opportunities to listen, understand, and express feelings among their peers.

5. Identify problems in the family. During talks with teachers, students may reveal family issues, such as a parent struggling with depression. Teachers can help arrange appropriate referrals for the family.

6. Connect with students on something of immense importance. These are the kinds of lessons and conversations that can genuinely transform children’s lives.

Grief Over Time

Here are three key features to remember about grief over time for children.

1. Grief proceeds on its own terms. There is no set time frame. There are no firm stages. Children don’t get over grief in a fixed amount of time.

   The second year after a death can seem even more challenging than the first. However, this is a point where the support and concern available immediately after a death has diminished greatly—sometimes it has virtually disappeared.
In many ways, children never get over a significant loss. The death of a close family member or friend is a life-changing experience.

2. As children grow and develop, even normative transitions and changes in their lives will remind them of the loss. A boy whose father died while he was in elementary school may miss him acutely when he enters puberty or transitions to college, at college graduation, when he is married, and when he has children or grandchildren.

3. As children develop, they become more capable of understanding and adjusting to their loss. The work of grieving becomes less difficult and requires less energy. It begins as a full-time job, but becomes more of a part-time effort that allows other meaningful work and experiences to occur.

Grieving lasts a lifetime, but does not need to consume a life.

Special Events

Children experience grief differently over time, and often revisit deep feelings at special events and times of transition. It can be helpful when teachers make a special effort to contact students at such moments. These may include:

• Holidays
• Birthdays
• Moves to a new grade or school
• Celebrations
• Awards, graduations, recognition
• Rites of passage (first bicycle, first job, first date)