



Advocating for Grieving Students - When Grief is Mislabeled

Grief in children and teens looks very different than what we are accustomed to seeing when an adult is grieving. Attempts to help students without knowing their grief story can be unintentionally harmful. Use the below as a guide to support your grieving students.

Looking beyond behavior

Like adults, children carry grief in their bodies. Unlike adults, children often lack control over their day to day environments and the developmental ability to compartmentalize challenging physical feelings.

In a classroom or group setting, grieving children or teens may seem *fidgety, restless, overtired, or lacking in self control*; all things that (though challenging to manage in a classroom environment) are normal for a grieving child. Our instinct is to support children by helping them "fix" what they are struggling with, but remember that these behaviors may be masking strong feelings of loss and grief.

There are times when a diagnosis and formal treatment for a behavior or other disorder are warranted and helpful, but assessing for the presence of a grief story when considering a student's behavior can help to ensure you create the best plan for them.

Acknowledging their grief evolution

There is no designated timeframe for how long we grieve following a death. This is especially true for children and teens, whose understanding of the death and all that has been lost is constantly evolving. As they grow, it is with them every day in a way that we may not otherwise expect, for both major milestones and day to day experiences. There is never a time when a child or teen is "done" with grieving the death of a loved one.

Once we know and accept this, we can make sure our students know that we see them and that their stories and pain are safe with us. We will not seek to pathologize their normal grief experience, and we will not tell them that they need to "move on" or "get over" a loss regardless of how much time has passed.





Considering changes to their home lives

As educators know all too well, a child's home life greatly impacts their ability to learn and engage at school. For many children and teens, the death of a loved one results in significant changes at home that we may not be aware of. The teen who is falling asleep during your class and not turning in homework may now need to work after school to contribute to household finances. A second grade student who is acting out defiantly may be responding to a new lack of structure at home because their caregivers are grieving or busy with new responsibilities following the death. Beneath these challenging behaviors are emotions; checking in strategically with your students and other support staff members can give valuable insight about what is happening beyond your classroom environment. Together you can create a plan to support grieving students in your school.

Speaking up with intention

Creating a culture of support and understanding for grieving children takes time and energy. Be intentional with your language, and gentle but firm when redirecting colleagues speaking about grieving children. This could sound like, "I heard you describe your student as a pain, but I think it's important that we remember all that his brain and body are trying to process following his brother's death. What can I do to help you support this student while you maintain your classroom flow?"

When the whole community is aware and engaged in supporting grieving students, the stress on both families and professionals is lightened. ***The team at A Haven is grateful for the care and energy you pour into your students!***

You are not in this alone. We are here as a resource to you, your team, and your community.

Please contact us for more information, let us know how we can best support you.

