



# Tough Topics Series Learning and Teaching Support

## Dealing with Death

When schools experience a crisis involving one or more deaths, everyone—adults and kids alike—grieve the death of individuals as well as the inevitable changes that occur as a result of the loss. While we can prepare ourselves to manage crisis, nothing really prepares us for the grief experienced after a death, and unfortunately, there are no quick fixes.

The information below is designed to equip educators and other caring adults with a basic understanding of how to effectively yet sensitively support kids when a death occurs.

### Kids Dealing With Death Have The Right To:

- Know the truth about the death, the deceased, and the circumstances.
- Have questions answered honestly.
- Be heard with dignity and respect.
- Be silent, if they choose, and not share their grief emotions/thoughts.
- Not agree with adult perceptions or conclusions.
- See the person who died and the place of death if desired.
- Grieve any way they want without hurting themselves or others.
- Feel all their feelings and think the thoughts of their own unique grief.
- Not follow the “stages of grief” as outlined in textbooks.
- Have irrational guilt about how they could have intervened to stop the death.
- Grieve in their own unique, individual way without censorship.
- Be angry at death and the circumstances surrounding it.
- Have their own theological and philosophical beliefs about life and death.
- Be involved in rituals related to death and closure such as funerals and memorials.
- Not be taken advantage of in their vulnerable mourning condition and circumstances.

## Developmental Impact and How to Help

Pre-School  
Infants/Toddlers

**Infants or Toddlers:** Have intuitive sense that something serious has happened, even if they don't fully understand it; read expressions and sense emotions in the environment; reactions are sensory and physical.

**Common Behaviors:** General anxiety; crying; sleeplessness; excessive sleep; stomach problems; clinginess, need to be held; separation anxiety; biting; throwing things; regression through baby talk, bed wetting; irritability; temper tantrums; clumsiness.

- How To Help:**
- ◆ Lots of holding, additional nurturing, and physical contact.
  - ◆ Consistent routine, including regular meal and bed times.
  - ◆ Rules and limits that are concrete and specific.
  - ◆ Short, truthful statements about what has happened.
  - ◆ Time for play, both physical and imaginative, to help process death.

**Pre-School Children:** Believe the world revolves around them and they “cause” things to happen. Have no cognitive understanding of death and often experience it as abandonment; emotional and behavioral responses at this age are often brief but intense.

**Common Behaviors:** Changes in eating and sleeping patterns; frequently regress to earlier behaviors; want to be dressed or fed.

**How To Help:**

- ◆ Use honest and simple answers.
- ◆ Be prepared to answer same question(s) over and over.
- ◆ Include in rituals around death, saying goodbye.
- ◆ Support in their play to act out grief.
- ◆ Allow for anger and safe physical expression of feelings.
- ◆ Maintain consistent structure and routines.
- ◆ Allow to act younger, regress for a while.
- ◆ Hold, nurture, and provide physical attention.
- ◆ Encourage and allow fun, happy times.
- ◆ Have books on death and grief available.
- ◆ Model by sharing personal anecdotes, as appropriate.

Elementary

**Elementary School Students:** Are concrete thinkers developing logical patterns along with increased language and cognitive ability; question how life will be different, what will be the same, and how one knows a person is really dead; want to see death as reversible, but also beginning to understand it is final.

**Common Behaviors:** Regression to earlier behaviors; fighting, anger; difficulty in paying attention and concentrating; daydreaming; not completing homework assignments; sleepiness, come to school tired; withdrawal; not unusual for questions and play related to death to be graphic and gory.

**How To Help:**

- ◆ Answer questions as clearly and accurately as possible.
- ◆ Help students identify and use available support systems.
- ◆ Work with students around academic workload.
- ◆ Encourage students to take a break and have time alone.
- ◆ Allow for expression of feelings and emotions.
- ◆ Provide art, journal, music, and/or physical outlets for grief.
- ◆ Maintain routines and structure but allow for flexibility.
- ◆ Give student choices whenever possible.
- ◆ Let student know you care and are thinking about them.
- ◆ Assign students a buddy who can support him/her.
- ◆ Create a "safe space" for students to go when needed.

Middle School

**Middle School Students:** Are more verbal and cognitively process information at higher levels; comprehend death as final and unavoidable which may provoke feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and increase risk-taking behaviors.

**Common Behaviors:** Physical responses including headaches, stomach problems, sleep disturbances and changes in eating habits; argumentative; withdrawal; sullenness; anger and fighting; sleepiness; lack of concentration and attentiveness; risk-taking behaviors (drugs, sexual acting out, stealing); unpredictable ups and downs or moodiness; erratic, inconsistent reactions.

**How To Help:**

- ◆ Expect and accept mood swings.
- ◆ Provide a supportive environment where students can share, when needed.
- ◆ Anticipate increased physical concerns including illness, body aches, and pains.
- ◆ Answer questions honestly and provide factual information.
- ◆ Allow student to choose whom and how he/she gets support.
- ◆ Encourage participation in a school-based educational support group.
- ◆ Allow some flexibility in completing school work.
- ◆ Encourage physical outlets to release grief.

High School

**High School Students:** Are philosophical about life and death but believe it won't happen to them; appear to use "adult" approaches of problem solving and abstract thinking in order to deal with grief; may fight against emotional vulnerability caused by death because they want to be independent.

**Common Behaviors:** Withdrawal from other parents and adults; angry outbursts; increased risk-taking behaviors (substance use or abuse, reckless driving, sexual behaviors); pushing limits of rules; lack of concentration; inability to focus; hanging out with a small group of friends; sad face, evidence of crying; sleepiness, exhaustion; feel responsible for taking care of others—particularly siblings.

**How To Help:**

- ◆ Allow for regression and dependency.
- ◆ Encourage expression of feelings such as sorrow, anger, guilt, and regret.
- ◆ Understand and allow for variation in maturity level.
- ◆ Answer questions honestly and provide factual information.
- ◆ Avoid power struggles and allow choices.
- ◆ Help students understand and resolve feelings of helplessness.
- ◆ Allow for flexibility in completing school assignments.
- ◆ Model appropriate responses, showing students your own grief.

**Behaviors Indicating  
The Need For  
Professional Help:**

- Suicidal thoughts or behaviors.
- Chronic physical symptoms without organic findings.
- Depression with impaired self-esteem.
- Persistent denial of death with delayed or absent grieving.
- Progressive isolation and lack of interest in any activity.
- Resistant anger and hostility.
- Intense preoccupation with memories of deceased.
- Prolonged changes in typical behavior.
- Use of alcohol, tobacco and/or drugs.
- Prolonged feeling of guilt or responsibility for the death.
- Major and continued changes in sleeping or eating patterns.
- Risk-taking behavior including identifying with the deceased in unsafe ways.

For additional copies of this publication visit: <http://www.k12.wa.us/OperationMilitaryKids/>

Written by Mona Johnson, MA, CPP, CDP, Program Supervisor

Information for this article adapted from *Helping Children Cope with Death - Helping the Grieving Students: A Guide for Teachers*; *When Death Impacts Your School* - by the Dougy Center; and *National Center for Grieving Children and Families*; [www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)