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# When Children Grieve

## Suggestions for the Classroom Teacher

By  
Frances B. Wood  
and  
James D. Kirylo

Association for  
Childhood Education International  
17904 Georgia Avenue, Suite 215  
Olney, Maryland 20832  
[www.acei.org](http://www.acei.org) • 800-423-3563

*Bitter are the tears of a child: Sweeten them.*

*Deep are the thoughts of a child: Quiet them.*

*Sharp is the grief of a child: Take it from him.*

*Soft is the heart of a child: Do not harden it.*

—Pamela Glen-Conner

As classroom teachers, it is inevitable that we will know students experiencing grief. In fact, two-thirds of children experience the death of a friend, sibling, parent, or grandparent by age 10, and 5 percent experience the death of a parent by age 16 (Brunk, 2007). Moreover, children also grieve about other life changes, such as the divorce of parents, moving from one city or country to another, losing pets, and saying goodbye to parents going to war.

When children lose a loved one, they are naturally shocked and confused. Additionally, parents, caregivers, and other family members may be experiencing their own grief and are emotionally unavailable, or they may be geographically distant and physically unavailable. Finally, because of the loss, the grieving child might incur additional responsibilities, experience changes in finances and housing, and lose contact with friends and neighbors.

Depending on the temperament, personality, and vulnerability of the child, a life-changing event such as a loss can negatively affect a child's disposition, motivation, and school performance. Teachers might notice such behaviors as clowning; withdrawing; calling answers out of turn; becoming restless or disorganized; and/or having difficulty staying on task, following directions, concentrating, or listening (Thompson, Kaslow, Price, Williams, & Kingree, 1998; Whiting & James, 2005).

Teachers assume a natural position in support of a grieving child. In fact, it is critical for a teacher to not only identify the probable signs that a child may be grieving, but also be aware of some strategies that may be helpful. This publication provides basic information regarding the grieving process, strategies that a teacher may employ while working with a grieving child, and helpful informational references.

## What Is the Grieving Process?

How the grieving process may unfold for a child depends on age, resiliency, and developmental level. Indeed, some children grieve immediately, while others grieve sporadically or delay acknowledging their feelings of loss (Himebauch, Arnold, & May, 2005). Although not always in an exact sequential process, children may experience the following emotions as a result of a loss. First, some deny that a loss occurred and project their anger on someone or something else. They may try bargaining to reverse the loss (or possible loss). For example, a child may internalize or vocalize that he/she will never again be mean to a younger sibling if Dad and Mom stay together. Additionally, some feel guilty and worry that they might have caused the loss. Finally, sadness and depression must be constructively addressed before the child can accept the life change or before he/she can construct and reconstruct meaning of life (Kubler-Ross, 1969; Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005; Lyles, 2004; Whiting & James, 2005).

## What Do Children Generally Think Regarding Loss?

The loss of a relative is one of the most common stressful life events for children (Breslau, cited in Melhem, Moritz, Walker, Shear, & Brent, 2007). Generally, preschool children often believe that death, divorce, and other permanent separations are reversible and sometimes blame themselves, thinking that negative thoughts on their part could have caused the loss/separation. Children 6 to 8 years old often become angry with the person separating or the deceased for leaving, see it as punishment, and blame others who did not prevent the parting. Additionally, they may become depressed and have difficulty sleeping. Pre-adolescents (ages 8-12) understand the permanence of loss and become curious about subsequent

rituals and traditions, but often have difficulty understanding their feelings. They worry that others may die. Adolescents (ages 12-18) understand the finality of death, may think expressing emotions is a sign of weakness, and believe others do not understand their feelings (Himebauch, Arnold, & May, 2005).

## General Suggestions When Working With a Grieving Child

- Facilitate a safe classroom environment in which sharing of feelings and emotions are encouraged and valued (Himebauch, Arnold, & May, 2005).
- Prepare classmates by discussing grief and loss, answering questions, and making suggestions about how they will all support the grieving child upon the return to class. Allow classmates to feel helpful by creating cards or a poster.
- Acknowledge the loss and validate personal feelings with such comments as, “You seem sad today” or “Would you like to talk about how you are feeling?” Sharing thoughts and personal stories are instrumental to the healing process (Whiting & James, 2005).
- Answer questions truthfully, and do not be afraid to admit that you may not have an answer.
- If necessary, refer the child to the school counselor or psychologist.
- Let the grieving child know that various feelings and emotions are not about being right or wrong as much as they are about a process of sorting things out.
- As much as possible, assist the child in maintaining the typical school-day routine.
- Allow the child to tell and retell personal experiences so that he/she can process them and begin creating new life stories.
- Assure the child that he/she is not alone and offer reassurance, extra time, and attention when needed. Foster awareness of healthy ways to deal with painful feelings.
- Affirm the student’s personal positive qualities,

talents, and strengths, thus reminding the student of the progress made so far.

- Encourage time for play and recreation.
- Use art-related strategies with all children in the classroom as the child sorts through feelings and emotions (see Malchiodi, 2003).
- Read a relevant age-appropriate book, showing any pictures. Then, retell the story by emphasizing incidents, feelings, relationships, and behaviors. Allow time for questions and discussion.
- Be aware of and sensitive to diverse cultural and religious traditions and rituals regarding tragedy and loss. If necessary, conduct appropriate research, talk to family members, and ask questions when appropriate.
- Contact support groups (hospice centers, hospitals, and counselors, etc.) that can help grieving families.
- Above all, listen.

## Conclusion

Teachers can be instrumental when discussing grief and loss with all students, especially by facilitating meaningful support for the grieving child. Teachers are natural caregivers and can assist in the healing process, potentially guiding students in learning important life lessons. Simply by listening and responding with validating comments and support, teachers offer immeasurable sustenance to children who may be grieving.

## Helpful Children’s Literature

### Pre-K-3:

*The Fall of Freddie the Leaf*

Leo Buscaglia

*When Dinosaurs Die*

Laurie K. & Marc Brown

*The Dead Bird*

Margaret Wise Brown

*Nana Upstairs & Nana Downstairs*

Tomie dePaola

*Remember the Butterflies*

Anna Grossnickle Hines

*Annie and the Old One*

Miska Miles

*When a Pet Dies*

Fred Rogers

### Grades 4-6:

*A Taste of Blackberries*

Doris Buchanan Smith

*Bridge to Terabithia*

Katherine Paterson

*A Day No Pigs Would Die*

Robert N. Peck

*What on Earth Do You Do When*

*Someone Dies?*

Trevor Romain

### Grades 6-8:

*A Ring of Endless Light*

Madeleine L’Engle

*Out of the Dust*

Karen Hesse

*Kira-Kira*

Cynthia Kadohata

*Missing May*

Cynthia Rylant

## Informative Websites

[www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org)

[www.hospice.org](http://www.hospice.org)

[www.beyondindigo.com](http://www.beyondindigo.com)

[www.kidsaid.com](http://www.kidsaid.com)

[www.childrensgrief.net](http://www.childrensgrief.net)

[www.save.org](http://www.save.org)

[www.compassionatefriends.com](http://www.compassionatefriends.com)

[www.tlcinst.org](http://www.tlcinst.org)

[www.compassionbooks.com](http://www.compassionbooks.com)

[www.udel.edu/dsp/sgcf](http://www.udel.edu/dsp/sgcf)

[www.griefnet.org](http://www.griefnet.org)

[www.virtual-memorials.com](http://www.virtual-memorials.com)