

When bereavement touches a school

By Melinda Phillips

Schools are unique and vital communities within suburbs, towns, and cities across Australia. Like all communities, relationships in schools are woven together with complex connections at a range of levels – between students, students and teachers, teachers and executive staff, teachers and families.

Death touches all communities and schools are not immune. It is estimated that one in thirty school-aged students will experience the death of a parent or sibling during their childhood, and this does not take into account the deaths of friends (who may also be students of the school) and extended family, and the family and friends of staff. The privileged place that school communities play in many peoples' lives (as students, workers, supporters and leaders) means that bereavement requires a thoughtful, informed and timely response from school staff and school leadership teams. This brief article will touch on what students may need and want from their school community at this difficult time.

It is important in this situation to be guided by the family's expectations and wishes, as shared with the school. Every child and every family is unique and will experience their loss and grief in their own way. What families want from the school, when and how may also change over time and a worthwhile way for the school to manage and respond effectively is through naming one key staff member to be the ongoing contact person with the family.

Supporting children and young people

While supporting children as they manage loss and grief in the school setting is a critical part of school life, it is a part that may feel overwhelming. Teachers can be reassured that their professional expertise, coupled with a sensitive and informed approach to bereavement will most often be enough to provide support to the children in their care. Some children and young people may need more structured support, and teachers and leaders can assist with this by providing access to information about in and out of school counselling and other services.

Some ideas for specific age groups are shared below as a useful starting point, but these are not prescriptive - an important guiding principle is to stay open and receptive to each child and their experiences and behaviours. This will help adults decide if and how to help. Children and young people move in and out of their grief. Some children, for example, may be very distressed at school and yet others may take a restorative approach to school life, preferring to deal with loss related issues elsewhere (Ackerman and Statham, 2011, p. 9).

Supporting young children (4-8 years)

Young children have some understanding of the permanence of death. They may also have unrealistic thoughts about their loss and blame themselves, and they may have frightening thoughts about the future. They may ask the same questions repeatedly, and need simple, honest answers as they make sense of the loss. Physically, they may be tired, distracted and unable to concentrate, and have stomach aches and headaches.

Supporting young children may include:

- answering questions simply and honestly
- allowing for the expression of feelings and the availability of appropriate comfort (a favourite teddy bear, etc)
- using a range of learning experiences– provide opportunities to draw, move and play
- creating a safe space for time alone for the student
- providing access to a support system in class (agreed symbols can help for students to flag they need some support/time away from the group, like placing a coloured card on the corner of their desk or table)
- planning together about completing activities and homework
- keeping to classroom routines, but being flexible when required
- assigning a class buddy for the student.

Supporting children (8-12 years)

Older children can usually fully comprehend the reality of their loss. They may try and mask their emotional reactions, either to comfort the adults around them or they may be angry and 'act out' this anger in a range of ways. Physically, they may experience many of the same reactions as younger students, being tired, achey (head, stomach, body) and experience changes in eating patterns, but they are also undergoing the physical and hormonal changes of pre-adolescence so many are also managing these developmental changes too.

Supporting children may include:

- teaching the student about grief and emotions so that they understand what is happening to them (and that this is normal and natural)
- accepting and helping the student to learn to manage changing moods
- planning for and understanding the impact of physical changes including tiredness on participation in school activities and tasks
- being flexible to accommodate emotions while maintaining class routines (safe space for alone time, and classroom signals for support as mentioned earlier may both be useful)
- giving the child opportunities to participate in decision making to build a sense of control, both individually and within the classroom environment
- encouraging them to access additional support when needed.

Supporting young people (13 – 17 years)

Teenagers may experience grief similar to the other adults in their family at some stages, and present much more like a child at other times. Teenagers are constructing their identity and bereavement can shake the fundamentals of this process, leading them to question even more who they are and what their place in the world is. Young people may experience intense, private grief, share the experience with their close friends, or do both. They may be more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviours if they feel they aren't managing the grief experience.

Supporting young people may include:

- teaching the young person about grief and emotions to build their understanding of what they are experiencing
- allowing for some regression in behaviours and managing expectations around this
- answering questions honestly
- supporting the young person to express and cope with their emotions
- allowing for choice and participation in decision making wherever possible
- providing flexibility around homework and assignments where possible
- encouraging the young person to access additional support (from friends, in school support and online eg reachout, headspace.)

Students need to feel safe, supported and have some opportunity to learn about what is happening to them when they return to school. Teachers can provide this in class, and additional support (such as participating in the *Seasons for Growth*[®] program at school) can also be helpful in normalising their experience and providing a safe space to share and learn with others.

Teachers, too, may need additional support to talk about how they are coping in class and school leaders should provide opportunities for structured support to teachers (school counsellors, school leaders or the school's EAP program may be good starting points.) Change and loss are a normal part of life, and by planning for and engaging with students, their families, and staff when bereavement occurs school leaders are giving their communities a chance to feel safe and supported at a very challenging and often overwhelming time.

References

- Ackerman, R and Statham, J. (2011). *Childhood bereavement: a rapid literature review*. London: The Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre.
- Graham, A. (2008). *Seasons for Growth*[®] Young People's Program Companion Manual. Sydney: Good Grief Ltd.
- Graham, A. (2014). *Seasons for Growth*[®] Parent Program: Supporting your child following separation and divorce. Sydney: Good Grief Ltd.
- The Dougy Center (2011.) *Helping the grieving student: A guide for teachers*. Portland: The Dougy Center.
- The Dougy Center (2011.) *Helping teens cope with death*. Portland: The Dougy Center.

Children Grieve too

- Children vary in their response to grief, they may express their reactions to death openly or not seem to be concerned about the event. Often children fluctuate between appearing to be unaffected and bouts of expressing grief.
- They may also hide their own feelings to protect a parent or other family members who may be distressed.

Many children process their grief through play – eg acting out a funeral.

Talking to your child about death

- Be honest with your children tell them the facts in simple terms. Statements like nan went to hospital and hasn't come home – or Johnny went to sleep can be very confusing for a child.
- Reassure children that it was not a result of anything that they did – eg they died because they were sick or it was a really tragic accident
- Avoid overwhelming them with too much information that may be confusing try not to say things like “everything will be fine”. It really doesn't match reality. It might be more useful to say things will get better – after a while and that might feel like a long time away.
- Take time to listen and validate feelings – it's normal to feel sad or angry. Give a range of avenues for expression like drawing, memory books etc.
- Reading stories together with themes of loss and grief or change.

What to expect from preschool aged children

- Be greatly affected by the emotions around them.
- May not stay sad for long – alternate between playing and feeling sad
- Have a matter of fact curiosity
- Become fussy irritable and withdrawn
- Have bad dreams or nightmares
- Regress in behaviour – bedwetting
- Physically search for their loved one that died.

What can help

- Reassurance and assistance to help them feel safe. Reassure them that they won't die because their loved ones have died.
- Sit and play with your child – follow their lead

What to expect from school aged children

- Beginning to understand the concept – knowing that it is not reversible – seeing it as final
- Believing that it only happens to other people
- Be very curious about death and burial rituals
- Sometimes playing games pretending to die
- Anger
- Be unwilling to express feelings
- Disturbed sleep
- Worry about who will look after them if a parent or caregiver dies
- Feeling isolated – no one else understands how I feel.

What can help

- Reassure and assist to feel safe
- Can be useful to ask what they are thinking or imagining as this can address any misunderstandings or fears.
- Reassure that grief is okay
- Allow them time to be alone
- Be open and allow them to know you have similar feelings and these feelings are normal and natural.

Remember to support yourself

- Parents have a key role as role models – Shared tears means shared grief
- Talk to identified supports
- Physical exercise
- Massage
- Writing a journal
- Try to maintain routine
- Prepare your child for comments and questions from others
- Contact your child's school for support ie – school counsellor
- You may be feeling over-protective and fearful about your children- this is a natural response.