Strategies for Understanding and Assisting the Grieving Student

Presented by Paula J. McCall, PhD, NCSP
National Association of School Psychologists
February 2011 Annual Convention
Nearly five percent of children under the age of 15 will experience the loss of a loved one in their lives.

Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2007
The Loss...

- May be of a parent, sibling, grandparent, close friend, or other family member.

- May have occurred suddenly or with knowledge ahead of time
  - However, even children who are “prepared” for the loss are still overcome by the intensity of actual grief and loss.

- Impacts every individual differently but always makes some kind of impact.
Outcomes of Loss

- Heightened risk for psychological problems
- Difficulties concentrating and performing in school
- Increased feelings of fear and sadness
- Decreased self-esteem
- Loss of connection with social network

- Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2007
Harvard Child Bereavement Study

- 125 children, ages 6-17, who had lost a parent; compared to 70 children who were not grieving

- Common symptoms: crying, anxiety about safety of self or others, feelings of guilt about misbehavior and lack of affection in past

- Increased physical complaints

- Increase in accidents and serious illness in first year compared to non-bereaved but then returned to normal levels in 2nd year

- McEntire, 2003
The Good and Bad News

- Approximately 80% of children in the HCBS demonstrated the resilience needed to adjust to the loss in a healthy way.

- 15-20% continued to demonstrate significant emotional and/or behavioral concerns 2 years after the loss

- Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2007
What Can We Do to Help?

1. Understand typical reactions to grief across age levels
2. Become familiar with the grieving process
3. Get to know the child: age, type of loss, personal understanding, etc.
4. Provide supports to child and family
Emotional Reactions to Grief

- Sadness, confusion, despair
- Anger, desertion
- Fear, anxiety about safety
- Guilt
- Confusion, powerlessness
- Adolescents may suppress due to social pressures, giving the mistaken impression that they are unaffected (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006)
Behavioral Reactions to Grief

- Anger: acting out, rage toward the one who has died
- Changes in eating and sleeping patterns
- Withdrawal, internalization of symptoms
- Regression to activities and needs of a younger child
- Attempts to bring the person back through fantasy, bargaining
- Play that incorporates death and dying
- May appear to return to “normal” routine quickly and easily but will continue to demonstrate grief sometimes due to unexpected triggers
Cognitive Understanding of Grief and Loss
(Fiorini & Mullen, 2006)

- Birth to Age 3 (Sensorimotor, beg. Preoperational)
  - Do not understand concept of death or forever
  - Recognize absence but may expect to return

Intervention: allow to cry, regress, attach; help label emotions
Cognitive Understanding of Grief and Loss (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006)

- Ages 3-5 (Preoperational)
  - Magical thinking: they have powers to control the world; they should have been able to stop the person from dying
  - Egocentric: cannot see another’s perspective
  - Beginning to understand what death means but still may believe it is reversible

Intervention: listen to concerns, answer questions, prepare for changes, allow for as much choice and control as is possible
Cognitive Understanding of Grief and Loss
(Fiorini & Mullen, 2006)

- Ages 5-9 (Concrete Operational)
  - Developing understanding of death as final, irreversible, and inescapable
  - Resulting feelings of powerlessness
  - May believe that their actions somehow contributed to the death, especially if sudden

Intervention: answer questions, encourage outlets
Cognitive Understanding of Grief and Loss
(Fiorini & Mullen, 2006)

- Ages 9-12 (end Concrete Operational, beg. Formal Operational)
  - Beginning development of abstract reasoning
  - Often ask “What if” questions about past and future events
  - Increased emphasis on friends, desire to not stand out or appear different

- Ages 12 and up (Formal Operational)
  - Exploration of what death means, attempts to integrate the experience into their own identity
The Grieving Process

- Worden’s “Tasks of Mourning”
  - To accept the reality of the loss
  - To work through the pain of grief
  - To adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing (external, internal/identity, and spiritual)
  - To emotionally relocate the deceased (as protector, supporter, provider of values to now follow) and move on with life

- Perschy, 2004
The Grieving Process

- Wolfelt’s Model of Mourning for Teens
  - Acknowledge the reality of the death
  - Move toward the pain of the loss
  - Remember the person who died
  - Develop a new self-identity
  - Search for meaning
  - Let others help you now and always

- Perschy, 2004
The Grieving Process: Core Issues

- Predictability of events
- Mastery and control over lives
- Development of self-image
  - Tend to have a more negative view of own performance while also seeing selves as more mature
- Sense of belonging
  - Tend to withdraw socially
- Fairness and justice
  - Comparisons to others’ “perfect” lives
  - Perschy, 2004
The Grieving Process

- Grief can manifest differently in each person, and it may come and go throughout life.
- Key triggers to returned feelings of sadness and loss include:
  - Holidays
  - Birthday and death anniversary
  - Experience of another death
  - Rites of passage (graduation, big birthday, etc.)
Getting to Know the Child

- Consider age and developmental level when preparing for meeting.
- Have plenty of materials available: stuffed animals, markers and paper, books, etc.
- Begin with a basic statement and question (“I understand that you had something sad happen. Can you tell me about it?”) and allow child to guide conversation.
- Encourage use of materials for expression
- Allow and accept silence
Getting to Know the Child

Key Information to Obtain about Child:
- Current understanding of the loss
- Current emotional state
- Desire to share
- Support system, both family and friends
- Possible secondary losses (i.e., financial difficulties due to loss of income)
Which Interventions Work?

- Bereavement interventions for children have the greatest impact when they:
  - Occur within a short period of time following the loss
  - Target children who are demonstrating high-risk concerns showing significant difficulty with adjustment to the loss
  - Focus on normalizing grief

- Currier, Holland, and Neimeyer (2007)
Individual Interventions

- Allow the child to talk about the person who has died and their emotions
- Discuss how life was before and how it has changed
- Educate the child about grief, normalize the experience
- Provide outlets such as puppets, drawing, and pretend play
- Share books related to grief, read them together and discuss
- Help the child set goals related to personal well-being
- Assist the child in identifying sources of emotional and social support
Individual Interventions

- Guide the child in changing negative cognitions to positive ones
  - Encourage to share stories about when the person was alive and not only the experience of the death
  - Encourage identification of personal strengths and accomplishments in this process
  - Encourage use of positive self-statements
  - Encourage identification of ways to experience joy again now

- Encourage identification of a commemorative activity and assist in its implementation
  - Balloon release (with letter or poem)
  - Memorial
  - Making of a vase to put flowers in on special days
  - Creating an album of the person’s life
The Story of Dahlia
What We Can Learn from Dahlia

- Children must balance their own grief with the grief of others in the home; they must be given time to process their own.
- Children can benefit from sharing their grief with others in the home.
- Young children may best express themselves through modes such as drawing while older may prefer verbal discussion and written outlets.
- A safe private environment allows for honest expression and normalization.
- Balloon liftoffs can offer a sense of closure while also providing a visual sense of “where” the person is for younger children.
- Short-term grief interventions can be effective.
The Story of Jasmine
What We Can Learn from Jasmine

- We must consider the primary and secondary losses in grief; in Jasmine’s case, this was not only the loss of the baby but also of the identity she had created for herself.
- Normalization and education of the grief process is critical.
- Adolescents may not be able to connect their emotions and behaviors to their loss and may need guidance.
- Some students may not be ready to commemorate; they instead may find comfort in other activities such as journaling.
- Peers can be unaware of the impact of their comments; we must help adolescents find positive sources of support.
- Goal-setting is an important method of re-focusing the student to their own life so that they can envision more than where they are now.
When Loss Impacts the School

- If a traumatic event has occurred, the trauma must first be handled before the loss can be explored.
  - Processing of what happened and students’ reactions to it can help in exiting from the shock and frozen state (Perschy, 2004).

- Teachers and other staff may also be experiencing grief and should be offered opportunities to discuss it as well as resources.
When Loss Impacts the School: Example

- Sudden loss of beloved mother of twin girls in the 3rd grade
- Administration sent out letters to parents notifying them of the loss
- Classroom meetings the next day to answer student questions
  - Discussion included how to react to the students when they returned
- Students made cards
  - Teachers were instructed to look for drawings, statements, or emotional reactions that indicated difficulties
- Follow-up with individual students and their parents when abnormal or intense reactions were noted
- Follow-up with father of girls to ensure that they had the support and resources they needed
Bereavement Groups

- Recommended when multiple students have been impacted by a common loss or when multiple students have experienced a loss within a short period of time.
- Provides mutual support, a sense of community, development of relationships, normalization, a safe outlet, and an opportunity for students to help, question, and encourage each other (Murthy & Smith, 2005).
- Activities vary by age and level of students but may include identification and exploration of emotions, discussion and sharing of the loved one, commemoration, and preparation for moving on.
References


Other Resources

- Compassionate Friends: a national network of support groups and resources for parents and siblings grieving for a child of any age
  www.compassionatefriends.org

- New Song Center: Phoenix-based program offering programs and resources for grieving children
  www.hov.org/new_song_center.aspx

- The Dougy Center: Portland-based program offering programs and resources, including special links for children and teens, related to grief
  www.dougy.org