

insights

February
2016

Providing Support for Grieving Students

In conjunction with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the New York Life Foundation recently conducted a survey to assess the number of classroom students affected by grief. They found that nearly 7 of 10 teachers (69%) reported having at least one grieving student currently in their classrooms. In addition, while 89% of teachers believed that there should be a greater focus on training educators to support grieving students, only 7% reported having had any amount of bereavement training.

Parents and guardians should take the lead in talking with their children when a friend or family member dies, or when news stories about death prompt a child's questions or creates anxiety. But, while it is not the role of teachers to counsel grieving students, when under stress children often seek the support and guidance of teachers, coaches, and other trusted adults. This is especially true when their parents and caregivers might be distracted and overwhelmed by their own grief in the aftermath of a family loss.

Schools can provide a safe place for conversations that deal honestly and openly with students' questions about death. The Coalition to Support Grieving Students offers many useful suggestions to help educators feel better equipped to answer questions, and to have difficult conversations with students. The Coalition emphasizes that despite teachers' understandable fears of upsetting the child or worsening the situation, the risks of saying nothing are worse. Saying nothing to a child who has experienced a death may communicate insensitivity or a lack of caring, may signal that you feel incapable of providing support and/or that you feel the child is unable to cope, or that it is inappropriate to talk about death. Children learn from an early age that adults are uncomfortable talking about death, and as a result, may suppress their own feelings, and thereby interfere with a healthy grieving process.

The Coalition offers a variety of suggestions for teachers of grieving students:

- Anticipate academic challenges and be proactive. Grieving students frequently exhibit distractibility and

difficulties with concentration, have problems with learning and/or remembering new information, and experience anxiety, sadness, and sleeping difficulties. Teachers can proactively intervene by re-scheduling tests or assignments; encouraging the student to work on a project with a partner instead of alone; suggesting a video or oral presentation instead of a paper if the student has concentration difficulties; offering accommodations such as more time to finish tests or projects.

- What to do/say: Express condolences and concern ("I am so sorry to hear about the loss of your father"; ask open ended questions ("how are you and your family doing?"); offer support and reassurance ("I am here if you want to talk"; "you will get better at coping with this as time passes"); accept any expressed emotion; remain available and present over time.
- What not to do/say: Limit sharing of personal experiences, or comparison to your personal losses; don't say "I know what you're going through"; "you must be angry"; "remember all the positive things in life"; "he's in a better place"; "at least he's not in pain anymore"; "you must be strong for your family now"; or any comments that might assume or invalidate the student's feelings or beliefs. ■

Reference:

Additional information for educators is available at the Coalition's website, www.grievingstudents.org.

ESS

EFFECTIVE
SCHOOL
SOLUTIONS

25 De Forest Ave., Suite 310
Summit, New Jersey 07901
Phone (973) 299-9954
www.effectiveschoolsolutions.com

The mission of Effective School Solutions is to provide high quality and cost-effective in-district clinical services for students with emotional and behavioral problems.