



## Supporting Bereaved Children Returning to School

As the end of summer approaches, many families are turning their attention to a new school year. For children who have experienced a loss over the summer, returning to school can be filled with anxiety. No matter when the loss occurred, we can all agree that school-life and home-life are inextricably intertwined, and children cannot simply compartmentalize or limit their experience of loss to home. Just as we do our best as caregivers to ensure they have solid support in their home-life, it's beneficial to proactively plan for support in their school-life.

Here are three essential needs in supporting a child's return to school.

### 1. Grief education:

Familiarize yourself with some of the potential ways grief can express itself in the school setting; below are some examples of the many "faces" of grief:

#### What to look for in the grieving child

##### Physical Changes

- Student is tired, sleepy or low energy
- Increase in somatic complaints (stomach ache, headache, etc.)
- May have increased anxiety or stress

##### Social & Emotional Changes

- Student withdraws from friends or activities
- Becomes disruptive in class, or acts out
- Regresses to earlier stage of development

##### Cognitive Changes

- Diminished focus/attention (may not be able to complete school work.)
- Forgetfulness, daydreaming
- Decrease in grades or interest in learning



### 2. Child's sense of safety/security:

We as caregivers can meet these needs of grieving children with predictable routines, and age-appropriate limit-setting. This helps bereaved children feel a sense of structure and safety; and when we have to follow through with consequences, it's important to convey to a child that they are loved, despite any misbehavior.

A child's sense of security is also tied into a sense of normalcy among their peers. Most kids naturally want to feel like they fit in. While it's important for a loss to be acknowledged, and school staff to be aware, it's important to give our children some choice in how much they want others to know about their loss. It can be helpful to have this discussion with them prior to talking to school staff, to honor their wishes as much as possible, and to help them find responses they feel comfortable with if others ask them questions.

### **3. Create a caring environment for your child**

It is essential that a bereaved child be made aware of the type of support they can expect when they do return to school. I recommend setting up a meeting with the school counselor and teacher prior to school starting, to let them know of the child's loss, to make them aware of how much or how little the child wants others to know, to express any concerns, and to coordinate any necessary accommodations or resources for the child. Let your child know that the school counselor is available for them should they feel overwhelmed by their grief or have any problems at school. And lastly, be available to the child as much as possible to listen, and to love, during this time of transition back to school.

Remember that kids just want to feel "normal." Do your best to respect your child's wishes while making sure they feel supported.

Wishing you and your family a smooth transition!