

Supporting Bereaved Children in Their Return 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 intertwined, and children cannot simply put their grief on hold or limit their experience of loss to home. Just as we can 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 some tips to support your child's return to school:

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



A Sense of Safety and Security

- Provide a predictable routine with age-appropriate limit-setting
 - Follow through with consequences
 - Convey to a child that they are loved, despite any misbehavior
- 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
 - Have this discussion with them prior to talking to school staff
 - Honor their wishes as much as possible (a child may want individual support, but may not want increased attention)

Plan and Prepare for situations

- Prepare yourself and your child for things that people may say to them. It is you and your child's choice on what they share with others.
 - **If they choose to not share**, practice ways they can decline that conversation.
Example: "Thanks for your concern, but I don't feel like talking about it."
 - **If they choose to share**, practice ways to talk about it, "Yeah, my person died. I'm still feeling really sad over it."
- It can be challenging when people say intentional or unintentional hurtful comments. Other children or adults may not understand loss and they may say things that hurt us.
 - Help prepare yourself and your child with some statements that help prepare you for that. "You know that doesn't make me feel good, I'm gonna take a break and go read a book."

Creating a Caring Environment

- Find the support your child may need at school
 - Set up a meeting with the school counselor and teacher before school starts
 - § Discuss the loss
 - § The child's wishes of information to be shared
 - § Express any concerns
- Coordinate any accommodations and resources available
 - Identify adults at school your child may trust, children will turn to someone they have a relationship with
 - Think of ways your child can take a break should they need to
- Allow yourself and your child to feel happy
 - It can be scary starting a new school year, but it can also be a year of new opportunities. It's OK to feel happy and excited while also grieving their loved one. Take time to talk about our different feelings and emotions during this time.

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Sources: Bo's Place, Grief in the Classroom (2018); How to talk to children and teens about death, suicide, homicide, and other end-of-life matters, Wolfelt, Alan (2018); Neville, Christi, The Christi Center (2018)

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