

# The Grieving Student

How schools can support students coping with loss

# What we will cover

- Development and how this influences grief reaction
- The spectrum of grief
- What schools can do to support students who are grieving
- How to talk to children about death
- Guidelines for the death of a student or teacher
- Resources, Resources, Resources!

# GOOGLE CLASSROOM

- go to [classroom.google.com](https://classroom.google.com)
- click on the + in upper right corner and select join a class
- enter this class code - **8xmfb5**

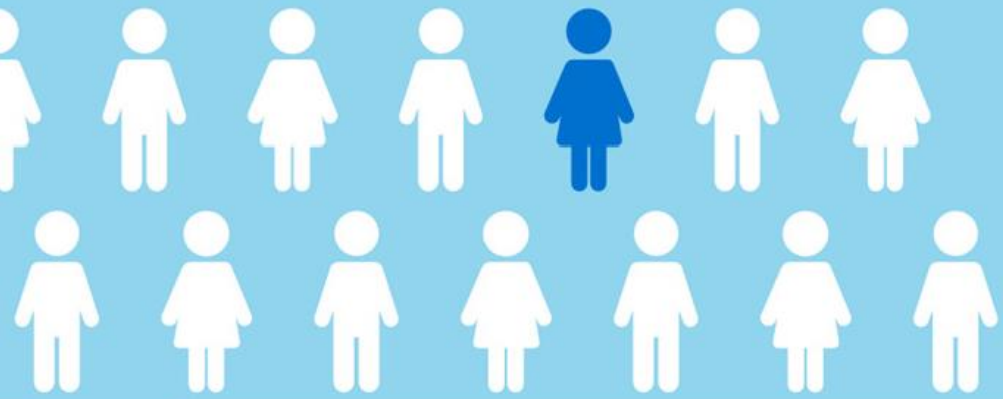


# GRIEF

n. [greef]

The natural reaction to the death of someone with whom you feel attached

What is grief?



**1 in 14**

CHILDREN IN THE U.S. WILL EXPERIENCE THE DEATH OF A PARENT OR SIBLING BY AGE 18

**7.0%**

OF CHILDREN ARE BEREAVED



>^

**9M**  
BY AGE 18



>**12.8M**  
BY AGE 25



MORE THAN

**2X** HIGHER



# Understanding Death

Four basic concepts about death

Universality

Irreversibility

Non-functionality

Causality



# Facts vs Myths

- Grief doesn't happen in stages
- There is no time table
- Grief can occur in waves – it is not necessarily persistent and unwavering
- Grief is not solely related to the death of a loved one. We experience grief after other types of losses
- There is no right way to grieve
- Grief is normal but may require extra support
- Children and adults grieve differently

# Anticipatory Grief

- Grief that occurs before a death, often in anticipation of the death of a loved one
  - Sadness and tearfulness
  - Fear of the death and changes associated with the death
  - Irritability, anger and anxiety
  - Sleep disturbances
  - Regret/Survivors guilt
  - Rehearsal of the death
  - Intense concern for dying person



# Acute Grief

- Early period after a loss and often dominates the life of a bereaved person.
- Strong feelings of yearning, longing and sorrow.
- Persistent thoughts and memories of the person who died.
- Painful emotions, including anxiety, anger, remorse, guilt or shame.
- Doing or not doing things to try to deal with the loss.

# Integrated Grief

- The lasting form of grief in which loss-related thoughts, feelings and behaviors are integrated into a bereaved person's ongoing functioning
- Grief has a place in the person's life without dominating



# Adapting to Loss

- Accepting the reality of the loss
- Adapting to changes in relationship with the deceased
- Seeing a future and possibilities of life with meaning, joy and purpose

# Complicated and Traumatic Grief

## COMPLICATED GRIEF

- Persisted form of intense grief in which maladaptive thoughts and dysfunctional behaviors are present along with continued yearning, longing and sadness and/or preoccupation with thoughts and memories of the person who died

## TRAUMATIC GRIEF

- A condition in which children whose loved one dies under traumatic circumstances develop trauma symptoms that impact ability to progress through typical grief process.



# Traumatic Grief Reactions

- Denial about the death
- Overwhelming separation distress
- Debilitating depression
- Suicidal ideation or self-harm
- Explosive anger
- Excessive fears worries/anxiety
- Guilt and self-blame
- Isolation, withdrawal, PTSD symptoms
- Recurrent upsetting/intrusive thoughts or dreams of the even
- Avoiding/numbing
- Functional impairments – social issues, academic decline, struggles with everyday tasks/chores

# Risk Factors for Complicated and Traumatic Grief

Nature of the  
Death

Impact of the  
Death

Response of  
surviving  
caregiving/family  
system

# Developmental Grief Reactions

## Preschool

- Don't understand the death is permanent
- Worry about surviving parent
- Magical thinking/fantasies





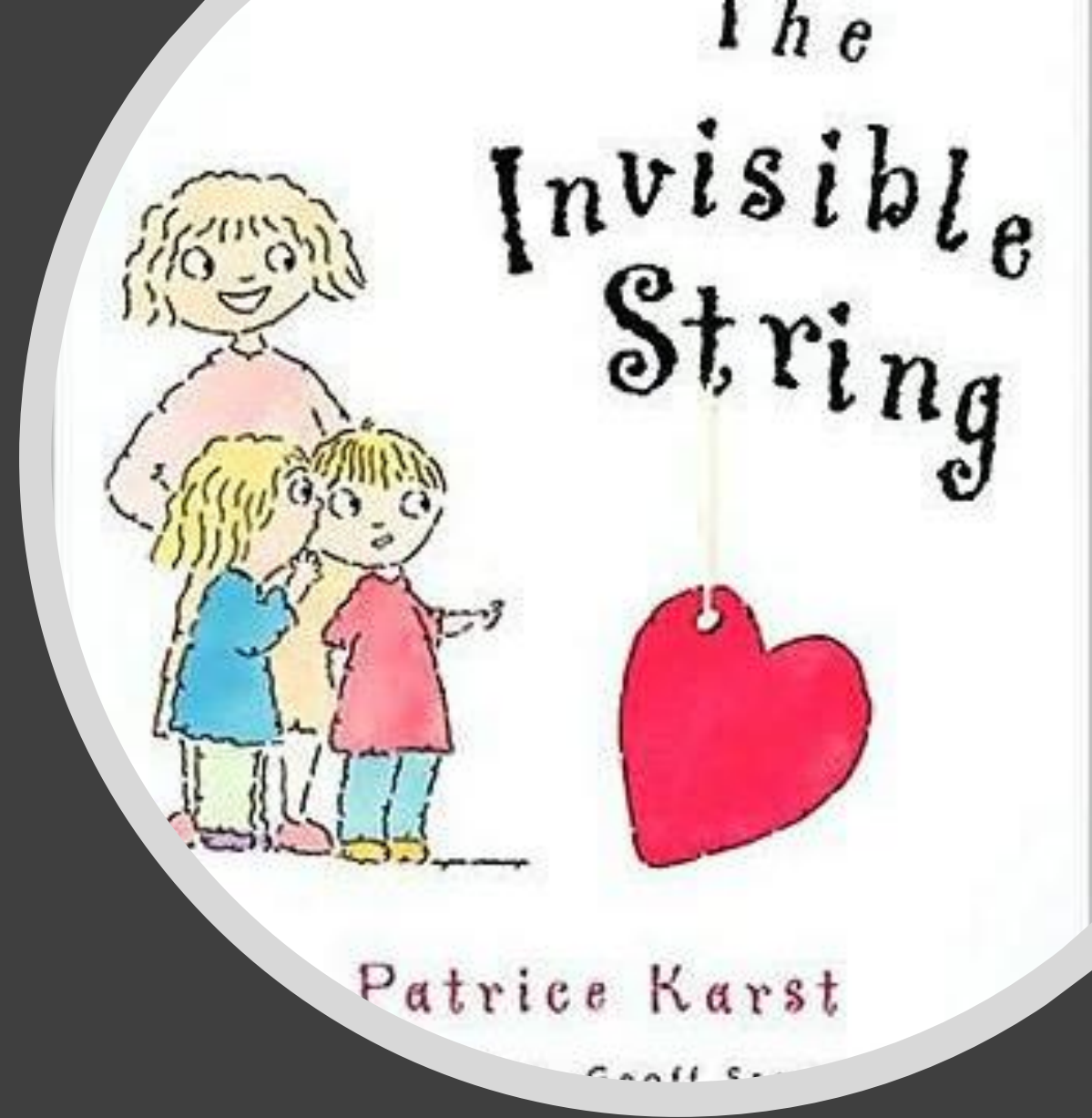



# Common Grief Reactions Preschool

- Regressed behaviors
- Repetitive questions
- Reenacts/expression of feelings through play
- Crying, somatic complaints
- Increased interest in dead things

## Ages 5-8

- Exploring independence
- Concrete thinkers
- Tendency towards magical/fantasy thoughts.
- See death as reversible.
- Can feel responsible and worry that their wishes or thoughts caused the person to die.
- May ask lots of questions





# Common Grief Reactions Ages 5-8

- Disrupted sleep
- Changes in eating habits
- Repetitive questions – How? Why? Who else?
- Concerns about safety and abandonment
- Short periods of strong reactions, mixed with acting as though nothing happened
- Nightmares
- Regressive behaviors/Behavior changes
- Physical complaints

## Ages 8-12

- Concrete thinkers, but are beginning to understand abstract ideas like death and grief.
- Beginning to understand that death is permanent
- Thinking about how the loss will affect them over the long-term.
- May focus on the details of what happened to the body of the person who died.
- May be less comfortable showing feelings
- Feelings of guilt and regret can lead to concern that their thoughts and actions made the death happen.

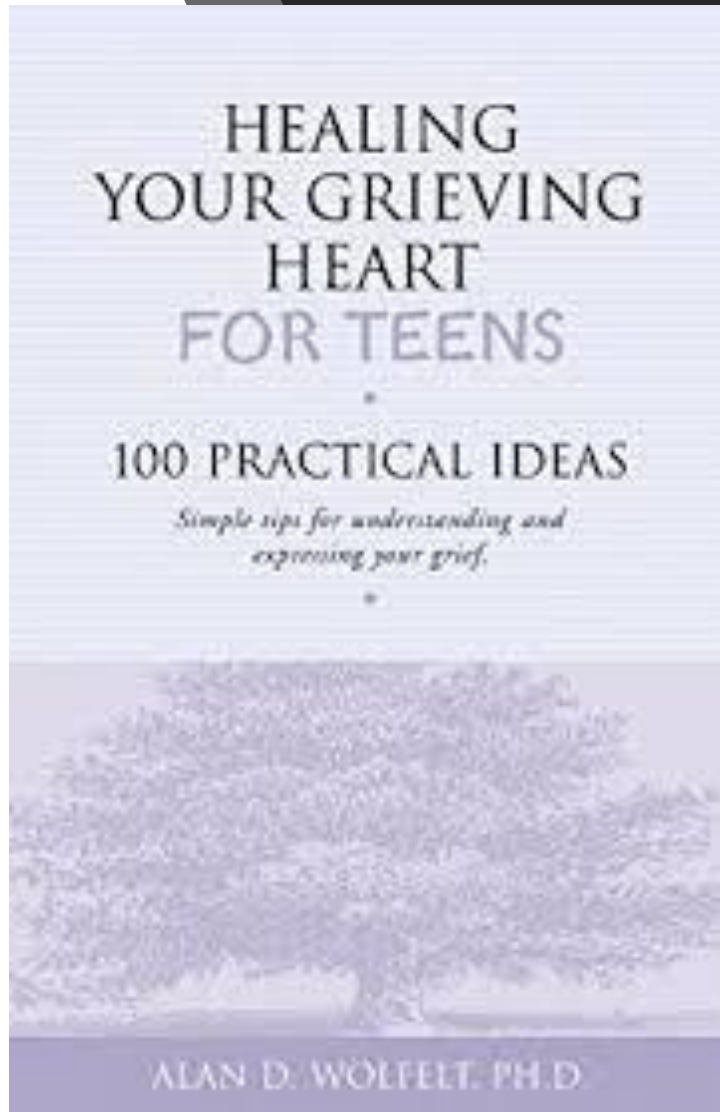





# Common Grief Reactions Ages 8-12

- Anxiety and concern for safety of self and others
- Worries about something bad happening again
- Difficulty concentrating and focusing
- Nightmares and intrusive thoughts
- Physical complaints
- Use play and talk to recreate the event
- Detailed questions about death and dying
- Wide range of emotions: rage, revenge, guilt, sadness, relief, and worry
- Withdrawal from social situations

# Ages 13-18



- Cognitively able to understand and process abstract concepts about life and death.
- Often rely on peers and social media for support.
- Understand death is permanent but may have unspoken magical thoughts (i.e. the person being on a long trip, etc.)
- May delve into questions about the meaning of life, death, and other traumatic events.



# Common Reactions Ages 13-18

- Withdrawal from family or other support networks/focused on connections with peers
- Changes in school performance
- Difficulty sleeping
- Changes in appetite
- Intense emotional reactions: anger, sadness, guilt, relief, anxiety
- Uncomfortable discussing the death or their experiences with parents and caregivers
- Worry about safety of self and others
- Fear about death or violence happening again
- May attempt to take on caregiving/parental role with younger siblings and other adults



# What Can Schools Do?



# How to Help

Avoid euphemisms such as “is sleeping, passed away”

Allow opportunities to express thoughts and feelings verbally and through play, physical and creative outlets

Give simple truthful answers in developmentally appropriate terms

Anticipation some regression

Maintain structure and routines

When appropriate include the child in family mourning and rituals

Find peer supports (grief camps, support groups)

# How to Help at School

Acknowledge the loss

Offer support and information to children and families

Make sure school is a safe place

Be prepared for impact of social media

No time table on grief and no child is too young to be affected

Help children preserve and create memories

Anticipate grief triggers

Cultural and religious considerations

# How to Help at School

- Have supplies of art materials and grief related books
- Normalize academic setbacks/challenges
- Adapt assignments, deadlines, reduce homework, coordinate extra help
- Give trigger warnings when classroom materials may be upsetting due to recent/past experiences
- Consider impact of secondary losses



# Talking to Children about Death



# Words Matter

Use the words – death, died, dead, dying

Use the deceased's name when appropriate

Be straightforward – “I’m sorry, I don’t know what to say”

Normalize their feelings

“It’s ok to cry”

Reassure them the death is not their fault

Let students ask questions; give honest and short answers

Make room for silence

Spend more time listening, less time talking



## Words Matter- Things to Avoid Saying

“He’s in a better  
place.”

“At least he/she is  
no longer in pain.”

“God has a plan/It  
was God’s will/It  
was just her time.”

“I also lost my  
mom/dad/sibling  
when I was your  
age.”

“My dog died last  
week too, I know  
how you must be  
feeling.”

“Stay strong for  
your family. People  
will be relying on  
you.”



# Words Matter- Helpful Things to Say

“Tell me more about what this has been like for you?”

“What sort of things have you been thinking about since the person died?”

“What are some of your favorite memories of the person?”

“How has your family being doing? What kind of concerns do you have about them?”

“I’m sorry for your loss, I’m here if you ever want to talk....or not talk.”

Offer a hug

# The Death of a Teacher or Student

Recommendations from the National Association of School Psychologists



# Communicating with Families

A letter and/or direct communication via email should be sent home to all parents on school letterhead informing them of the death. Information to include in the communication:

- Facts about the death to dispel rumors
- Discussion of the range of feelings and reactions that may occur throughout the grief process
- Guidance about talking to their children about the death
- Indicators of the need for mental health counseling
- Direction on how to contact the school if they have questions or believe their child may benefit from counseling
- Direction on how to obtain community resources

# Communication with Staff/Faculty

- Share factual information with staff (through meetings and bulletins), students (through class announcements and meetings), and parents (through letters/email). Regularly provide them with relevant updates.
- Provide teachers with guidelines on how to share information about the death with their students and establish referral procedures for students requiring additional support.
- Pay close attention to students who have experienced recent deaths or key life changes, witnessed the death, or have emotional problems.

# Memorials

- Develop a school- or district-wide policy concerning memorials.
- Have a written “memorial procedures” plan.
- Designate a memorial committee and chairperson to make decisions.
- Involve all important stakeholders (students, staff, parents, and community members).
- Be proactive in working with families and students to create appropriate memorials.
- Follow the maxim of “do no harm.” Memorials should not be a source of retraumatization.
- Do not make memorial creation or attendance mandatory.

# Memorials After a Suicide

- Do not make a permanent memorial following a suicide.
- Do not glorify, highlight, or accentuate the event in any way due to risk that others will copy the act
- Choose memorials that are temporary, nonrenewable, or in the form of a “living” memorial
  - Monetary donation to important cause
  - Have students participate in a community event to raise money/awareness for suicide prevention

# Resources

- [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#)
- [National Association of School Psychologists](#)
- [National Alliance for Grieving Children](#)
- The Grieving Student by Marsha Quackenbush
- [Center for Complicated Grief](#)
- [The Dougy Center](#) and [School Toolkit](#)
- Google Classroom with handouts, resources, articles and books
  - [www.classroom.google.com](http://www.classroom.google.com)
  - Click “+” to Join a Class
  - Enter class code : 8xmfb5

# GOOGLE CLASSROOM

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