



When Grief Goes to School: Five Tips for Parents

The words “back to school” often bring up a range of emotions for children, including excitement to reunite with friends and share stories about the summer months, worry about the upcoming academic challenges and sadness that the summer is over.

When a child or teen has experienced the death of someone in their lives, the thought of going back to school may often bring additional challenges. There are a number of things parents can do to help their children feel safe and give them a sense of stability.

1. Practice a consistent routine.

Following a loss, your family is likely going through some very significant and difficult changes. The transition back to school is an additional change and adjustment for children.

This transition can be made easier by creating a schedule that includes a bedtime routine, planning and discussing day-to-day activities (chores, making lunch, how they will be getting to school and back).

Having a predictable routine can reduce anxiety and can help give children a sense of normalcy and control.

2. Include the school as part of your support network.

Share the death or loss your family has experienced with teachers and school administration. Mention any concerns you may have related to how your child is responding to this loss. You may find it helpful to schedule an appointment to discuss this in person. Providing this information to the school will help them provide a supportive environment for your child.

Talk with your child about how and what they wish to share with friends and classmates. Oftentimes children are tempted to keep their loss a secret as a means to protect themselves from unsolicited attention and comments. As life at home is impacted by the illness or death, they may want to keep school as “normal” as possible. Encourage your child to talk about their grief with people they trust.

3. Understand the impact that grief can have on children.

Grief impacts multiple areas of functioning, including social, emotional, cognitive, spiritual, and physical. There is no set timeline for the grieving process. Grief is as unique as the person experiencing it and there can be many ups and downs. It is not uncommon for children’s academic performance to be impacted due to decreased concentration and focus. Reassure your child that these changes are normal and temporary. The school can help by making some adjustments and accommodations for your child (e.g., quieter space for tests, give them more time to complete an assignment, do a verbal test instead of written)

4. Make a plan for school should they feel overwhelmed.

With input from your child and the school, decide on a point person or a safe place for your child to go to when they are in need of support. Discuss with your school any signs that your child is struggling as well as coping strategies that you and your child have found to be helpful. Good communication will create a better and more responsive support team for your child.

5. Take care of yourself.

Remember that you are also experiencing your own grief. One of the biggest ways you can help your child adjust to going back to school is by modeling how to express and cope with change and loss. Make sure that you are getting your own support and are being patient with yourself.