

The Grieving Elementary School Student

Elementary aged students are concrete thinkers who are beginning to develop logical thinking patterns along with increased language and cognitive ability. After a death, they begin questioning how their lives will be different, what will be the same, and how one knows the person is really dead. They are usually interested in how the body works and ask specific questions like: “Did his blood get all over the windshield?” Or, “Will her hair fall out now that she’s dead?” It is not unusual for their questions and play to be graphic and gory, displaying a fear of bodily harm and mutilation. Although their discussions and play can be unsettling to teachers and parents, it is important to give simple, honest answers to their questions.

The overwhelming concern with the body and what is happening to it may bring about the desire to be with the deceased person. For example, it is not unusual for children to say things like, “I wish I was dead so I could be with daddy.” Statements like this do not necessarily mean the child is suicidal or really wants to die; rather, they are most often expressions of deep longing for the deceased. However, any time a child talks about wanting to die, it should be taken seriously and explored. Discerning whether the child is expressing a normal, common desire to be with the lost loved one, or is truly at risk of endangering her own life may be difficult. If you have any concerns, request professional intervention immediately.

While six to twelve-year-olds want to see death as reversible, they are also beginning to understand that it is final. Because they are beginning to understand the permanence of death, they worry about their own and other’s deaths. They often perceive death as a punishment for something they did, and therefore, they often associate guilt with death. They may think, “If only I’d been a better daughter or son, maybe my mom would still be alive.” They are beginning to become more socially aware, and look to others to see if they are acting or responding correctly. The family is still the main security and support, but their role in the family has changed and they need to figure out what their new role is.

Because school is such an integral part of the student’s life, and because the academic expectations are increasing, you may notice that grieving students have difficulty attending, staying focused, remembering what was said, and completing assignments. These are normal grief responses and should be expected and planned for. Students may also appear withdrawn or depressed. Many grieving students have difficulty getting sleep, wake up during the night, have night terrors, or awaken very early. Teachers may notice these students come to school tired.

How to Help

- Answer questions as clearly and accurately as possible
- Provide art, journal, music, and dance activities
- Make time for physical outlets, sports, games, walks, etc.
- Help the student identify and use support systems
- Work with the students around academic workload

- Encourage the student to take a break and have some alone time
- Allow for expression of feelings and emotions
- Maintain routines and structure but allow for flexibility
- Give the student choices whenever possible
- Let the student know you care and are thinking about her
- Assign the student a buddy who can work with her
- Create a “safe space” that a student can go to when needed

Common Behaviors to Expect

- Regression to earlier behaviors
- Fighting, anger
- Difficulty in paying attention and concentrating
- Daydreaming
- Not completing homework or assignments
- Sleepiness
- Withdrawal

Taken from The Dougy Center: *The National Center for Grieving Children & Families*