
When Grief Comes to School

Helping Students Face the
Death of a Friend or
Family Member

William G. Hoy



GRIEF  **CONNECT**
INC.

About the author. . .

As a counselor and professional educator, William G. (Bill) Hoy presents more than 70 continuing education programs for caregiving professionals every year. From 1996 to 2006, Bill directed the family and community bereavement program for Pathways in Long Beach, California. He also taught death studies, counseling, and bioethics courses on the health science faculty at Cypress College from 1994 to 2003.

In addition to his academic credentials, Dr. Hoy holds board certification in death education and grief counseling (FT) and chairs the work group on School Crisis and Loss for the Association for Death Education and Counseling. He is a frequent invited presenter for school staff inservice programs across the United States, and regularly advises school districts on crisis and grief intervention programs.

After 25 years in southern California, the Hoys now make their home in the central Texas community of Crawford.

Dr. Hoy welcomes administrators, classroom teachers, and school counselors to call with specific concerns. You may reach us at (254) 292-9900 or at GriefResources@msn.com. For current contact information, please visit us on the web at www.GriefConnect.com.

Helping a Student in Grief

Children grieve differently than the grown ups in their lives but they really do experience the sadness, anger, guilt, physical symptoms, spiritual questions, and social isolation that come with grief. Teachers, school counselors, nurses, and administrators have an incredibly important role in the lives of bereaved children and teens.

Grief might come to school for any number of reasons. Perhaps the father of one of the children in your class was killed in a car crash. Perhaps the sibling of one of your students has died after a long fight with cancer. Especially on high school campuses, school faculty all too often face the death of a student by suicide or accident. And of course sometimes, the unthinkable happens and your own tight community of children is invaded by the death of one of your own students.

As you help students in your school cope with the death of a loved person, here are some important pointers to remember.

Clarify questions. Children are not only idly curious or voyeuristic with their questions. Every teacher knows that asking questions is an important tool to help pupils understand what was unclear about what we said. When a student or the parent of a student has died, it is important to answer questions as truthfully and as tactfully as possible.

Remembering the times we
shared together is one healthy
way for the school community
to grieve together

But answering the question doesn't mean telling everything you know. Instead, clarify what information the student is seeking by asking, "What would you like to know?" The rumor mill is active on most campuses, so I have found it helpful to discover what kids have already heard. Then, I am better prepared to respond to the misinformation and shatter the playground myths. In any case, a teacher can say, "Most of the things you are hearing are just people's ideas about what happened. How about if we wait and see if we get some more accurate information."

Tell the truth. Human development specialist Dr. David Crenshaw writes, "Children can bear the truth, no matter how painful, much more easily than they can handle being deceived." Always be willing to say, "I don't know but I'll help you find out."

Know that grief is not just emotional. You may find a bereaved student temporarily withdrawn or acting out. He still needs firm boundaries and school rules should still apply, but know sometimes this is how children express the anxiety and anger of grief. She may have difficulty concentrating or daydream more, but all of these changes in behavior are usually short-lived. An ongoing dialogue between teachers, administrators, and parents is imperative.

Share stories. Taking a few minutes of class time to talk about the student or parent who died is a vital investment. If the student who died was in your class, you will undoubtedly want the

assistance of administrators or other caregivers since this will be a difficult task for you. Here are some questions that can spark a discussion:

- ◆What did you like best about him/her?
- ◆What have you talked about at home about this?
- ◆What was his favorite game on the playground?
- ◆Who in here ever met Bobby's dad; what do you remember about him?

Model healthy grieving. Students are most helped when teachers acknowledge that we are all sad right now. If tears come, do not apologize or run from the room; simply say something like, "I'm having a 'Devin moment' right now and I know you all understand. . ."

Students cannot be sheltered from death and grief and that would not help them anyway. What your child needs from you is a healthy model for how to grieve rather than an attempt to "protect" them. Allow them to see your tears and sadness, encouraging them to experience grief. Come to terms with your own attitudes and anxieties about death since usually, kids are more at ease than we are. Sadness is okay.

Become educators of parents. If a child has died or another parent has died, this is an emotionally trying time for the other parents in your classroom. For most of us, our own child's death is unthinkable and this probably hits "way too close to home." As a result, some parents may hope you will say nothing in the classroom and pretend nothing has happened.

On the contrary, the majority of parents are delighted the school will take up such a delicate topic. They usually don't know what to say and almost always, they won't know why their children are behaving the way they are. This is an important opportunity to educate parents, as well. The pamphlet, *Parenting a Child Through Grief* will be helpful to parents, including much of the same information that is here but addressed to parents.

Different Ages, Different Grievs

Era	Grief Awareness & Intervention
Infants & Toddlers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Understand loss primarily as an assault on their own security ▪ Minimize chaos by preserving routines (bed, meal times, etc.) ▪ Provide for basic needs (food, shelter, comfort) ▪ Will likely imitate the grief expressions of caregivers ▪ Hands-on care by primary caregivers is vital
Preschoolers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Often experiences death as one's own fault (I caused it) ▪ Death is reversible and preventable (magical thinking) ▪ Have more ability to experience grief than explain it, making art and play both helpful tools ▪ Simple books read to the child are helpful
Middle Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Child can differentiate reality & fantasy (magical thinking has generally ceased) ▪ Death is somewhat final but always avoidable ▪ Needs concrete explanations and sensory experiences (touch, smell, taste, sight, hearing) ▪ Child able to read simple books on grief by himself/herself ▪ Child learns and makes sense of his world through asking questions
Older Children/ Pre-adolescents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sees results of death in life (realities of grief) ▪ Dreams of future are shattered by realities of loss ▪ Active games help channel emotion and physical energy ▪ Writing abilities are well-defined so journaling becomes a much more helpful activity
Adolescents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Era of concurrent crises; death becomes a big one ▪ Perception of immortality is shattered by death of a family member or good friend ▪ Greatly fear being "different" so most likely to resist grief groups or "counseling" ▪ Significant deaths are most often to younger people (other teens or parents) and these deaths are frequently unexpected ▪ Journaling first can become a means to talk through the loss

In the Classroom. . .

When the school community learns of the death of parent or student, there is usually almost no time to make a plan for what to do when the children arrive. Here are a few ideas for dealing with a death that has impacted your campus or community.

Acknowledge the death. Following your campus crisis plan and instructions given by your administration, but by all means, acknowledge the death of a student, teacher, or parent. Make sure to note when and where counseling services are available, and let students know you understand some will need to leave the classroom to talk with one of the counselors.

Be flexible with your lesson plan. On the morning of 9/11, a friend of mine and her fellow-students were greeted by their college history professor with these words, “Well, it’s a bad day all around. But we need to keep going to cover all the material for the semester so we don’t have time to deal with this. My lecture for today will be. . .”

Cruel as that might seem, it also shows a lack of understanding for how people learn. Your efforts to “keep going” with the curriculum if most of your students are emotionally elsewhere will be little more than an exercise in frustration. Tell the students that you want to stop to deal with the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of grief through which everyone is now walking. Let them know that later in the day or tomorrow, you will get back on track, but for now, you feel it is best to take a few minutes to deal with this experience.

Students who are deeply impacted by a death will not concentrate on algebra, the Periodic Table, or British literature. I have worked with hundreds of schools in the aftermath of trauma. Please believe me when I say these moments will be an investment that will repay you many times over in the remainder of the school year.

Lead the students to do something. When faced with uncertain experiences, humans have an amazing ability to take adaptive action. These actions help us cope with the highly charged emotion of the experience and self-regulate our behavior.

Depending on the age of your students, you can lead them in many activities to take this adaptive action. Inviting the children to “make cards for Bryan’s family” can be a wonderful activity. With young children, I have seen teachers lead the class in a discussion of some of the words that most describe Bryan, listing them on the white board. Then, these help remind the children of things they can write in their condolence cards. Parents treasure these.

Teenagers can be encouraged to write in a journal or participate in a discussion, reflecting on their friend’s characteristics. In the unlikely event someone offers a rude or disrespectful comment, you can manage them the same way you would any such comment in your classroom.

Freely admit, “I don’t know.” Young children expect teachers to know everything (that wears off by third grade, doesn’t it?!) Most kids look to the adults at school as people who care for them and know the answers to their questions. Unfortunately, many of these questions cannot be

answered honestly. Especially questions that start with “Why. . .” are difficult, if not impossible, to answer. “Why did he do this?” or “Why can’t the doctors make him better?” and “Why hasn’t God healed her?” are questions for which we don’t usually have answers.

It is best to say, “I don’t know,” but then follow that, especially with older children and teens with a question like, “What do you think might be some of the reasons?” or “What do you think it might be like to die?” or “What do you imagine Heaven to be like?” When we ask follow up questions like these, they open lines of communication and allow more expression of the student’s thoughts and feelings related to the death. Often, it is in this context that we find children feeling they are responsible for the death or are being “punished by God” for something they did.

Use props to encourage dialogue. Books are excellent resources for classroom use after the death of a child, sibling, or parent. Reading the book together provides wonderful opportunities for group conversation in the classroom. There are some suggested resources at the end of this pamphlet and your school counselor or librarian likely know of other titles.

The vast majority of behaviors you see in your students are perfectly normal. Of course, conferring regularly with your school counselor, nurse, psychologist, or administrator is key to making sure the student has access to all of the support services necessary.

Above all, however, be willing to grieve with your students. Some of the most “protective” things you can do for students are to be honest with them and to share the grief experience with them.

After the Crisis

Communication. Communicating with your students, staff, and parents is integral in the early aftermath of a crisis. Most school response plans include samples of letters to send home and announcements to make over the school's public address system—at least immediately after a school crisis. Experience indicates the open, honest communication—whether over the PA system or in individual classrooms during the first hour of the day—help dispel rumors and help students trust that administrators and teachers are trustworthy.

Permanent Memorials. In many communities, it has become popular to erect “roadside memorials” to young people who die in traffic crashes or at the scene of other fatal accidents. If a student dies in an accident, you can expect that students who knew him well will be involved in this off-campus building of a “memorial.” But additionally, students may want to put posters on a wall with a student's photo or place memorial letters around his or her locker. Offering these memorial items to the family is a wonderful gesture instead of just discarding them at the end of the week; telling the students early that the items will be handled that way helps assure students their tributes will not simply end up in the trash.

While these types of memorials are temporary and usually disappear in a few days, often there is a rush to erect a permanent memorial in the student or teacher's name somewhere on the school campus. Caution is important with such permanent memorials.

Permanent memorials must be maintained. I was saddened a few years ago to discover a tree outside the principal's office at my children's elementary school with an overgrown plaque dedicated to the memory of a child who had died several years earlier. In my experience, it is better to have no permanent memorial than one that is not maintained.

Permanent memorials also set a precedent. One high school principal called recently to say, “My gym looks like a cemetery!” Not only had the school had more than its share of student deaths, but it seems that each parent wanted to pay tribute to their child in a grander way than the ones before. The principal said that between the retired athletic jerseys hanging on the wall and the plaques and statues around the gym, there was no escaping the trauma the school had experienced. Unfortunately, once a precedent is set in motion, faculty and administration might find it difficult to stop.

Administrators can suggest other ways to pay tribute to a deceased student's life. After her eleventh-grader died in a car crash, one mom decided to use the money in her daughter's college fund to give a cash scholarship each year to another student, selected by the school's scholarship committee. Now, the mom attends the end-of-the-year award ceremony to make the presentation of the scholarship named in her daughter's memory. The gift helped both students and this grieving mom to create something meaningful out of an unspeakable tragedy.

Anniversaries. The anniversary of a death is an important occasion for remembering the life that was lived and its impact on the school community. When a teacher or student died, the first anniversary of the death will often occasion a rekindling of sadness and loss as well as a rebirth of traumatic memories long-sense resolved. School communities vary in their approach—usually either wanting to do more than is necessary or else completely ignoring the day. Our experience suggests that a middle ground is usually most helpful.

One way to acknowledge the death's anniversary is by acknowledging the day in your public announcements at the beginning of the school day (or whenever you make your general announcements). The following text is a simple, direct way to make this announcement.

As many of you will undoubtedly remember, today marks the first anniversary of the death of _____, our friend and fellow student/teacher. (John/Mr. Kelly) will always be remembered for his (two or three characteristics like love of learning, sense of humor, tender heart, practical jokes, artistic ability, great trumpet playing, etc.) For his family and for the friends he had here at school, this day brings a mixture of sadness at his loss and a smile at the memories for how he touched our lives.

It is common to feel some of those same feelings you did when you first heard of _____'s death. Of course, I invite you to talk with one of our teachers or counselors today or in the next few days if you want. In addition, we have provided a table and box (by the cafeteria, in the Quad, etc.) if you wish to write a note of remembrance to _____'s family. You can share a story, tell them of some way their loved one touched your life, or simply remind them they continue to be in your thoughts and prayers. At the end of the school day today, we will be giving all of those items to Mr. & Mrs. _____.

Our faculty and staff felt it would be helpful for us to take a moment this morning to remember _____ in a moment of silence. Will you please join me now in remembering our student/teacher and friend.

Resources for Reading and Discussion

For Faculty and Staff. . .

The Grieving Child: A Parent's Guide by Helen Fitzgerald (Fireside Press, 1992)

35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child by the staff of the Dougy Center (Dougy Center, 1999)

Children Grieve, Too by Joy and Marvin Johnson (Centering Corporation, 1998)

What Will We Do? Preparing a School Community to Cope With Crisis by Robert G. Stevenson (Baywood, 2002)

For Teens. . .

When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens About Grieving and Healing by Marilyn E. Gootman (Free Spirit Press, 2005).

The Grieving Teen: A Guide for Teenagers and Their Friends by Helen Fitzgerald. (Fireside Press, 2000).

Straight Talk About Death for Teenagers by Earl A. Grollman (Beacon Press, 1993).

Fire In My Heart, Ice In My Veins: A Workbook for Teens in Grief by Enid Samuel Traisman (Centering Corporation, 1992).

For Children. . .

When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death by Laurie Krasny Brown and Marc Brown (Little Brown & Co., 1996).

When Someone Very Special Dies by Marge Heegard (Woodland Press, 1988).

Aarvy Aardvark Finds Hope by Donna O'Toole (Compassion Books, 1988)

Cemetery Quilt by Kent Ross, Alice Ross, and Rosanne Kaloustian. (Houghton Mifflin, 1993)

Good-Bye, Vivi! by Antonie Schneider and Maja Dusikova (North-South Books, 1998)

Parent's Guide to Grieving Children

Children grieve differently than the grown ups in their lives but they really do experience the sadness, anger, guilt, physical symptoms, spiritual questions, and social isolation that comes with grief. As a parent, you are your child's best support during this time. Here are some ideas to help you as you walk with your child through this very difficult time.

Clarify questions. Ask something like, "Are you asking where Grandpa's body is now or are you asking what our family believes about what happens to a person after he dies?" The question, "What would you like to know?" helps clarify what your child is asking.

Tell the truth. Human development specialist Dr. David Crenshaw writes, "Children can bear the truth, no matter how painful, much more easily than they can handle being deceived." Always be willing to say, "I don't know but I'll help you find out." Do not risk your child learning the truth from friends or the news media; gently explain what happened and be as honest as possible.

Know that grief is not just emotional. You may find your child temporarily withdrawn or acting out. He still needs firm boundaries and household (and school) rules still apply, but know sometimes this is how children express the anxiety and anger of grief. She may have difficulty concentrating or daydream more, but all of these changes in behavior are usually short-lived. Talk to your child's teacher if you are concerned.

Share stories. If this was your child's classmate, ask questions like, "What did you like best about him/her?" or "What was his favorite game on the playground?" If you have stories about the person's life, share them. Tell about what you liked about the person and what kinds of things you remember doing together.

Model healthy grieving. You can't shelter your children from death and grief and that would not help them anyway. What your child needs from you is a healthy model how to grieve rather than an attempt to "protect" them. Allow them to see your tears and sadness, encouraging them to experience grief. Come to terms with your own attitudes and anxieties about death since often, kids are more at ease than we are. Sadness is okay.

Talk about the funeral in advance. Explain what will happen using the senses—"You will see and smell some beautiful flowers; which do you think would be Bobby's favorites? or "If you touch Grandma's hands in the casket, they will feel cool and waxy—kind of like a candle." You will hear people talking about John; you will hear some of Grandpa's favorite songs being sung. You will see some people crying and some people not crying. You can do whatever you feel is right for you. If you want to leave, we can leave.

Do something. Make cupcakes or cookies for the family. Select a fruit basket or a plant together and deliver it personally. Prepare a meal and take it to the family. Go have ice cream together and talk about your favorite stories of the person who died.

Read together. Some of our favorite books for kids in grief: *Goodbye Vivi* (Antoinette Schneider), *When Dinosaurs Die* (Marc & Kelsey Brown), *Lifetimes* (Bryan Mellonie and Robert Ingpen), *It Must Hurt a Lot* (Doris Sanford), and *I Miss You* (Pat Thomas). Parents will find great help in Helen Fitzgerald's book, *The Grieving Child*. Both teenagers and their parents will find great information in *The Grieving Teen*, also written by Helen Fitzgerald as well as a journal for teens entitled *Fire in My Heart, Ice in My Veins* (Enid Traisman).

Talk to a professional. If you have questions about your child's experience in grief, seek advice from the school counselor, clergyperson, school psychologist, or a community mental health professional who understands grieving children.

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