

Supporting a Grieving Child in the Classroom

Supporting a grieving child or young person at school is a long process, and often becomes more challenging as time goes on. Many children tell us that the second year after their loved one's death is more difficult than the first year.

As the reality of the permanence of the death sinks in and the initial feelings of shock subside, the sense of loss and longing take hold. Often, this can coincide with a time when the attention and concern from others begins to fade. It is at this time that teachers and others who work with children and young people can be most helpful and supportive.

There are many triggers in the school environment for the bereaved child, such as aspects of the curriculum, parent consultation evenings and in particular their 'successes' such as making a team or winning an award. Social interaction with peers who ask questions about their family or complain about their own parents/siblings can be hard to manage. Even many years after a bereavement it can be enormously helpful for a caring adult to acknowledge the bittersweet feelings evoked by important milestones and the ongoing nature of grief.

Grieving children may behave in expected ways such as being tearful and withdrawn. However, they can also behave in unexpected ways such as being:

- Distracted, have a short attention span and 'daydream' a lot
- Forgetful and absent minded
- Fearful, apprehensive and anxious
- Angry and having sudden outbursts of tears or frustration
- Aggressive and 'picking fights'

There are some ways to help a grieving child during the school day

- Providing a Time Out Card allows the child to leave the classroom in a discreet way if they are worried about becoming upset or crying on front of their peers. Please contact Grief Encounter who can supply you with our own cards.
- Allow a child to keep a small unobtrusive photo that is a comfort to them, it can be advisable for this to be in a keyring or a case of some kind.
- Allow short phone calls if they need reassurance that others are safe
- Designate a support person for the child such as school nurse, counsellor or SENCO
- Don't be afraid to talk to the grieving child and ask how they are doing but ensure you do so in an appropriate place and when both you and they have time to properly engage.
- Remember that listening is more important than offering advice or trying to find out what has upset them at a particular time. You cannot fix it for them and children know that but are grateful for the opportunity to be heard.

