

Supporting Students Through Big Changes



As a teacher, support staff, or administrator, it's likely you'll work with a student who is facing a major life change. Whether it's death, illness, divorce, a family member being incarcerated, moving, or other major transition, all change can come with feelings of grief and loss. These tips will help you navigate being a supportive presence for students experiencing grief in the midst of big life changes.

INFORMATION

Talk with the family to find out what information, if any, they want to share with the class about the loss. Every student is different and it's important for them to have a choice in what information is shared and how.

LISTENING

One of the most supportive ways to respond to a child experiencing a major life change is to listen without interrupting, interpreting, evaluating, or offering advice. Being able to express thoughts and feelings without needing to manage how others respond is a rare and vital experience for anyone facing grief.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Letting the student know you are aware of the change can be supportive, but be conscientious of the time and place. Even very young children can be aware of how uncomfortable grief makes other people. They are sensitive to what they perceive as sympathy — aka: the “you poor thing” voice. Although “I’m sorry” is a common response, many children and adults grow tired of hearing it over and over. Instead say something like, “I heard about (the change) and I’ve been thinking of you. I’m here and will check in to see if there’s anything I can do.”

ACCEPTANCE

Grief and loss are as unique as we are, but many children will give themselves a hard time for what they are thinking and feeling. If they share an aspect of their grief with you, provide reassurance that there is no right or wrong way to grieve, as long as they aren't hurting themselves or others, and that all of their feelings and thoughts are valid.

CONSISTENCY AND ROUTINE

When a loss or major change happens, everything in a child's life can feel unpredictable and confusing. For some, school offers a consistent structure and familiarity that is comforting. Providing normalcy is an easy way to support grieving children.

FLEXIBILITY

Even though most children appreciate consistency and routine in the midst of such upheaval, there are times when flexibility is needed. Grief takes a tremendous amount of energy and can leave children struggling with focus, memory, and completing tasks. Ask the child and their family what accommodations would be helpful.

SAFETY

Work with the child, their family, and others in your classroom to create a Hard Days Safety Plan. This plan should give students options for what to do if they get overwhelmed during the day.

RESOURCES

Most children dealing with big life changes have a mix of easy and challenging days. However, if you notice any profound changes, including difficulty with tasks, depression or anxiety, risk-taking behaviors, or suicidal thoughts, reach out to the family and connect with our KinderCare resource team for appropriate referrals and resources.

