

BACK TO SCHOOL WITH GRIEF



Children and teens spend the majority of their time at school, and they take their grief with them when they go. For some, returning to school is comforting. They find support in the structure, familiarity, connections with friends, and the opportunity to focus on something other than grief. For others, it can be a challenging venture that brings additional stress, uncertainty, and worry.

How to help depends on a number of factors: How old is your child and what grade are they in? Who died in their life and what was their relationship? How did the person die? When did the loss occur? There's no formula for how the answers to these questions affect someone's grief, but they are important to consider as you sort through how to best support your child or teen in returning to school.

No matter our age, we engage with grief on many levels: emotional, physical, cognitive, spiritual, and behavioral. Whether it's the emotional ups and downs of relating with peers, focusing on schoolwork, or having to talk about family culture and beliefs for a project, school can be a place that engages multiple facets of grief.

Transitions can be difficult for anyone, but especially so for those who are grieving. As your family moves from the rhythm of summer back to school, children and teens may be worried, irritable, or overwhelmed. You can support this transition by planning ahead and talking with them about upcoming changes related to bed/wake up times, chores, pick-up/drop-off routines, homework expectations, and after-school activities.

One of students' biggest back to school concerns is wondering who knows about the death and what details

they have. If the death happened over the summer, or if your child is going to a new school, ask what they would like shared with teachers and classmates. Your child's first instinct might be to keep the death a secret.

Often, they fear being treated differently or being seen as "the kid whose (parent/caregiver/sibling) died." While it's important to honor your child's wishes, talk with them about the challenges of trying to keep the loss a secret. Doing so takes a lot of energy and can limit their ability to open up with friends. Also, when teachers know your child is grieving, they are better equipped to be supportive and understanding. Talk with your child about the power of being able to tell their own story, rather than people finding out in other ways.

Here are a few other general back to school aspects to consider:

Make a difficult day safety plan: Throughout the year, there will be months and days that are more difficult than others. Often these coincide with the approach of significant days. It could be your child's birthday or the birthday of the person who died, the anniversary not only of the day someone died, but also any other events connected to the death such as a diagnosis, hospital stay, or "first and lasts" (i.e. first volleyball tournament since the death, first field trip without the



person there to chaperone, etc.). Talk with your child to identify what they need when they feel overwhelmed. Then, collaborate with teachers, counselors, and administrators to identify strategies for your child to access that support. This might be identifying a teacher, counselor, or other staff that your child feels safe with and making a plan for how they can leave their classroom to check in with that person. One family used a pebble system where the student could silently place a pebble on the teacher's desk as a sign that they were going to the office for a short break with a counselor. Even if your child never implements their difficult day safety plan, it can be reassuring to have one in place.

Find ways for children and teens to check in with you or other caregivers: After a death, children and teens often fear something will happen to other people in their lives. Going the entire school day without a check-in can be a lot to ask, especially in the first few months after a death. Talk with your child and school staff about how they can check in with you or others at certain times throughout the day. This can be a simple as a quick phone call at the school office or a lunch time text.

Plan drop-off and pick-up routines: If the person who died was a part of a child's drop-off and pick-up routine, those times of day can be especially difficult. Ask your child ahead of time about these and talk about possible options. Some will want to keep things as similar as possible, while others may want to try something totally new. Nine-year-old Maya was used to walking her little sister to class every morning. When her sister died over the summer, Maya dreaded walking into school without her sister there to hold her hand. After a few conversations, she and her father realized if Maya could be ready to leave ten minutes early, her father could walk her into school and still get to work on time.

Talk about after-school rituals: Similar to drop-off/pick-up routines, what after-school activities are affected by the death? Is your child used to having

a snack and going to the park with his grandmother every day? Did your teen go over to her best friend's house to work on homework? Not knowing what it will be like can be the hardest part of grief, so work together to come up with an after-school plan. This gives your child a chance to talk about what they will miss and be part of coming up with new alternatives they can look forward to.

Address challenges with concentration, memory, and school assignments: Grief can take a toll on our ability to focus and complete tasks. As one teen shared, "Thinking about my sister's death took up all of my brain space, there wasn't any room left for algebra." Many people say they struggle to remember anything from moment to moment, leaving them in need of multiple reminders and strategies to stay organized. The same is true for students. Work with your child and their teacher(s) to come up with ideas for trying to focus and keeping track of schoolwork. One fifth grader picked a homework buddy who promised to check in at the end of the day to make sure he had all the correct assignments.

Make time for recreation, play, and friends: Grieving students are still children and teens who need time for rest, relaxation, and fun. When school and work get hectic, making plans for connecting and fun can be put aside in an effort to get everything done. Play is how children, especially young children, process and integrate what is happening in their world. If the person who died was a big part of their play and fun, it's helpful to be aware that they might be worried about who will do those



activities with them now. If your child had a weekend tradition of watching movies or playing video games with their brother, ask if that is something they want to continue to do with someone else or if it feels too painful. Let children know it's okay to keep traditions or change them up completely. Sometimes a loss can leave a parent or caregiver with significantly less time and financial resources for recreation and play. If this is true, are there people in the community who can help? For many children, knowing they have dedicated time to spend with the adults they care about, no matter the activity, is the most important thing. Sitting down once a day to read a book together, walking the dog after dinner, or even making a pillow and blanket fort are great options for connecting.

Find ways to take care of yourself: Research shows that how grieving children fare is strongly connected to how their adult caregivers are doing. Self-care is often easier said than done, especially when you are grieving and it feels like one more thing on a very long to-do list. Whether it's finding time to be by yourself, connecting with others, exercising, getting enough sleep, being creative, or anything else that brings you ease and comfort, attending to the needs of your mind, body, and spirit is one of the best ways you can support your child.



Returning to school is a significant experience for every student and particularly for those who are grieving. No matter how your child feels about the start of school, we hope these ideas and suggestions will provide you with a good foundation for talking with them about their concerns and finding ways for them to feel supported and understood.



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Founded in 1982, Dougy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. Dougy Center provides support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children who are grieving.

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