

Supporting students who have a family member with an advanced serious illness

As a teacher, you will likely encounter a child who is living with the anxiety of a family member's life-limiting illness. You will have the opportunity to be a support person, providing empathy as they face the serious illness, and perhaps death, of a family member.

1 LISTEN

One of the most helpful and healing things to do is to listen to their story without judging, interpreting, evaluating or offering advice. Listening, even briefly, to anything they're willing to share sends the message that you are a safe and supportive person.

2 ACKNOWLEDGE

Say something that acknowledges you know about their family member's illness. Be authentic. Although "I'm sorry" is a common response, children tell us they don't like to hear "I'm sorry." Better to say "I'm thinking of you" or "You've been on my mind."

3 UNDERSTAND

You can't take away the feelings of pain, fear, loneliness, or being different that children experience when a family member has been diagnosed with a terminal illness. Your role is not to get rid of the feelings, but to create a safe environment where they can be shared.

4 PROVIDE CONSISTENCY

The structure, routine and consistency of the classroom can provide a sense of stability. At the same time, allow for some flexibility for those children who need extra care on hard days.

5 HELP

Help the student make a plan for completing schoolwork. Stress and anxiety can manifest in students as well as difficulties with concentration, memory, low energy and fatigue. Communicate often with the child to discuss specific, flexible goals for schoolwork completion.

6 SAFETY

Provide a safe place for children to go when feeling overwhelmed, stressed or anxious. Have the child choose an adult who is available to listen and talk with them.

7 PROVIDE RESOURCES

Most students have a mix of some easy days and other days that are challenging and difficult to get through. A child who is profoundly affected may experience drastic emotional and behavioral changes may need additional support. If you have concerns, reach out to the family and our team.

