

# SUPPORTING STUDENTS AFTER A DEATH: TIPS FOR TEACHERS & SCHOOL PERSONNEL



**As a teacher, school counselor, support staff, or administrator, it's likely you'll work with a student grieving the death of a family member or friend. Supporting anyone in grief can be intimidating, and especially so when it's a child or teen. Drawn from the insights of grieving students we've worked with at Dougy Center, we've compiled these tips for supporting students after a death.**

## INFORMATION

Talk with the student and their family to find out what information, if any, they want to share with others about the death. Every student is different and it's important for them to have a choice in how the information is shared. In general, being open and honest about the death seems to reduce the stress of trying to keep it a secret and can make it easier to receive support from classmates. If the person who died was also a member of the school community, check with the administration to find out the school's policies and procedures for responding to a death.

## LISTENING

One of the most supportive ways to respond to a grieving student is to listen without interrupting, interpreting, evaluating, or offering advice. Being able to talk openly about thoughts and feelings without needing to manage how others respond is a rare and vital experience for those in grief.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Letting the student know you are aware of the death can be supportive, but be conscientious of the time and place. Most grieving students are very aware of

how uncomfortable grief makes other people and they are sensitive to what they perceive as sympathy (aka: the "you poor thing" voice). Although "I'm sorry" is a common response, many grieving students grow tired of hearing it over and over.

Instead say something like, "I heard about your dad and I've been thinking of you. I'm here and will check in to see if there's anything I can do to be helpful." Reaching out through writing can be a great way to let a student know you care without the pressure of having to respond in the moment.

## ACCEPTANCE

Grief is as unique as we are, but many students 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 & ROUTINE

When a family member or friend dies, everything in a student's life can feel unpredictable and confusing. For some, school offers a consistent structure and familiarity that can be comforting. Allowing normalcy in the student's life is an easy way to support them.



## FLEXIBILITY

Even though most students 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 students struggling with focus, memory, and completing tasks. Ask the student and their family what accommodations would be helpful.

## SAFETY

One of grieving students' biggest fears is becoming emotional in front of classmates. Work with school staff, the student, and their family to create a difficult day safety plan. This plan should give students options for what to do if they get overwhelmed during the school day, including a place they can go to connect with a counselor, teacher, or other support person.

## RESOURCES

Most grieving students have a mix of easy and challenging days. However, if you notice any profound changes including: difficulty with school

work, depression or anxiety, risk-taking behaviors, or suicidal thoughts, reach out to the family and connect with your school's mental health staff for appropriate referrals and resources.



Thank you for taking the time to read these tips for supporting grieving students. You play a unique role in their lives and can have a significantly positive impact on their experience by providing support, understanding, and acceptance.

For more resources and information, please visit our website at [www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org).



The National Grief Center  
for Children & Families

### Our Mission

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. We provide support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children in grief.

### Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

Dougy Center has been helping children, teens, young adults and their parents cope with death since 1982. Our practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what we have learned from more than 55,000 Dougy Center participants. To order online, visit [dougy.org](http://dougy.org) or [dougybookstore.org](http://dougybookstore.org), or call 503.775.5683.